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**Democratic Confederation: A Radical Model for Political Emancipation
in Northern Syria.**

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**Democratic Confederationism: A Radical Model for Political Emancipation
in Northern Syria.**

by

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Abstract

Democratic Confederalism: A Radical Model for Political Emancipation in Northern Syria.

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This thesis is a study of the democratic confederalist movement in Northern Syria, known as the Rojavan Revolution. Through an analysis of the political thought of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, and the influence of his political writings on political developments in Turkey and Syria beginning in 1999, I connect the development of democratic confederalist institutions and transformations in Kurdish political activity to the epistemic break in Öcalan's political writings, following the transformation of his political ideology from a traditional Marxist-Leninist to the confederalist approach, which is strongly influenced by the writings of the social ecology Murray Bookchin, as well as the popularization of the works of postmodern social theory among the Turkish left.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the midst of the Syrian Civil War, reports from Rojava, the northern region of the embattled Middle Eastern country tell of a radically transformed civil society, practicing direct democracy, gender egalitarianism, and an elimination of the sectarian politics which have plagued the region for decades under authoritarian rulers. The events followed the establishment of the three independent cantons of the Democratic Federation of North Syria in 2014, although de facto military control and political control over the region was established following the withdrawal of Syrian regime forces in 2011. The subsequent emergence of network of political organizations and self-governing institutions during what is called the Rojava Revolution constitutes one of the most progressive and indeed successful revolutionary political movements in the history of the modern Middle East, implementing a form of social libertarianism bordering on anarcho-communism, and inspired by the late political writings of Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the PKK, the militant leftist Turkish group that fought the Turkish state following the 1980 military coup in Turkey.

The term Rojava Revolution refers to then the subsequent transformation of political and civil society that occurred in the wake of the transfer of power from the government to political parties that prior to the revolution in 2011 had remained underground, and the subsequent institutionalization of democratic confederalism, a

decentralized system of governance first proposed by the social ecologist Murray Bookchin. Bookchin's political treatises, largely marginalized in the Western academy, were enormously influential in shaping the political thought of Abdullah Öcalan, whose political pamphlets, critiques and treatises would provide the foundation for the governing philosophy of the umbrella coalition that emerged to govern Rojava, The Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM). The advent of democratic-confederalist thinking among left-wing Kurdish parties such as the PKK has both produced a significant epistemological break in the understanding of democracy and revolution among large portions of society in south-eastern Turkey and northern Syria, shifting political praxis away from the Marxist-Leninist model of armed revolution and towards the production of decentralized institutions designed to undermined and resist the exercise of state authority. This is an exceptionally salient shift in the practice of what is sometimes termed “ethno-politics” or “ethno-nationalism” and has produced a wide rift between traditional Kurdish political parties based on the nationalist model and the new “confederalist” movement which explicitly rejections concepts of ethno nationalism as providing a sound ontological basis for political emancipation.

In interrogating the meaning of revolution and democratization as it is understood by the adherents of this political movement, a certain amount of attention must be given to distinguishing the underlying philosophical basis. The events in Syria provide an opportunity to revisit questions regarding the strength of authoritarian governments in the region and the possibility for the emergence of autonomous democratic governance. The seeming “otherness” of the Rojavan Revolution in both political discourse and practice

have left it largely marginalized within the larger discussion of what is termed political democratization. The model of “democratization” and indeed political revolution followed by the political parties organizing the Rojavan revolution has nearly nothing to do with concepts of democratization or revolution that would be familiar to practitioners of Western political science. Joseph Schumpeter, in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, writes that “The 'democratic method, is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.”¹ Writing some forty years later, Samuel Huntington correctly observed that, regarding whether or not this definition of democracy as primarily an institutional arrangement would hold, “by the 1970’s the debate was over” and that “Sweeping discussions of democracy in terms of normative theory sharply declined, at least in American scholarly discussions, and replaced by efforts to understand the nature of democratic institutions, how they function, and the reasons why they develop and collapse.”² Moreover, this view of democracy as fundamentally a normative institution coincides with a significant decline in the actual perceived democratic value of the institution itself. That is to say, democratic institutions are not necessarily in and of themselves capable of delivering democratic legitimacy, even in liberal democratic states. This was articulated by Tala Assad in *Formations of the Secular*, when he suggested that “The distinctive feature of modern liberal governance is neither compulsion (force) nor

¹ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (Harper Collins, 1950). page 250

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1993). page 3

negotiation (consent) but the statecraft that uses self-discipline and participation, “law”, and “economy” as elements of political strategy.”³ The primary feature of Asad’s conception of liberal governance is the use of a political medium as an element of this liberal statecraft which redefines individual practices of the self to create a “transcendent” representation of the citizen rooted in the conception of a “national identity.” In Assad’s conception then, the minority dilemma is an inevitable consequence of liberal government’s attempt to “transform the self” by rearticulating the parameters of citizenship. One such example in the relevant case is the long held insistence by many elements of the Turkish government that Kurds are just “mountain Turks.”⁴ The attempt to construct a “national identity” through the mediation of individual identity is a feature of liberal governance that is shared across secular Middle Eastern and European countries, even though other functional features of democratic institutions may not be present.

Despite Huntington’s proclamations, discussions about what democracy could and should mean had not ceased in large parts of the developing world, where the institutional arrangements advocated by liberals would be varyingly used to enforce and impose systems of juridical power based on reactionary nationalism and authoritarianism. The attempt to offer a different philosophical and theoretical approach to the meaning of democratic change, particularly in the Middle East, all of whose largely authoritarian

³ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003). page 5

⁴ M. Michael Gunter, *The Kurds A Modern History*, 1st edition (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2015).

nations hold regular “democratic” elections, then becomes a germane subject of discussion. In the case of Rojava, the political revolution which took place was not based in any recognizable understanding of democracy as an institutional arrangement resembling that described by Schumpeter and Huntington and largely accepted by the Western academies. It was based rather on a growing body of political critique produced by the imprisoned founder of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, who following his arrest and trial began writing political treatises in prison on Imrali island that had a major discursive and political impact on the Turkish left and the events which lead to the Rojavan revolution. Moreover, these treatises challenged the underlying philosophy of what can be termed the chief political project of colonialism, which was the organization of the entire world system into a system of sovereign nation states resembling those which had emerged in Europe throughout the early modern period. Contrary to the suggestion of Huntington, the discussion regarding “democratic theory” was not closed. The Rojavan revolution in fact rejected many of the institutional arrangements implied in Huntington's definition of “democracy”. The movement incorporated elements of political anarchism resembling the movements that emerged in Revolutionary Catalonia and the Paris Commune, and incorporating elements of critical theory produced by American and European modern and postmodern scholars such as Murray Bookchin, Fernand Braudel, Pierre Clastres, the Frankfurt School and other influential critics of capitalism and European modernity. This produced an alarmingly distinct epistemological break between the earlier left-wing intellectual and paramilitary movements, based largely on unswerving adherence to doctrines of Marxist-Leninism, and their newer counterparts,

who rather than seeking to overthrow the state, began to undermine it through the practice of democratic confederalism.

My thesis constitutes an attempt to trace the intellectual roots of the Rojava Revolution to their proper historical and intellectual roots by examining the textual basis of the movement in Abdullah Öcalan's *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization*, and to discuss how the radical anti-authoritarian political institutions developed in the three cantons of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria emerged as a response to the ideology of authoritarian nationalism that governed Syria as well as other Arab nations in the post-colonial era. Looking closely at the philosophical underpinnings of “democracy” as it is understood by practitioners in Rojava leads to two important conclusions. The first is that democracy as a political system cannot be uniform across the globe without consideration for the differing economic, social, cultural and historical conditions that shape the limits of these institutional arrangements. In other words, like any other instance of deterritorialization, wherein a concept, practice or political ideology emerging from western Europe impacted development in the Orient, the transfer of “democracy” both as a discourse and as an institutional arrangement, produced ripples of inconsistencies, reactions, and counter flows that generated a correspondingly strong attempt to reshape the meaning of democracy in the East. Any attempt to glimpse then the reality of democratic practice that emerges in the East from a Western lens will produce distortions and refractions that obfuscate a clear picture of how other societies can and choose to understand and use certain concepts. The other, closely corresponding conclusion, is that any attempt to approach a theorization of politics in the East without a

healthy respect for the actual production of political discourse in political treatises, ideology and political discourse will inevitably lead to this obfuscated gaze. Thus throughout the thesis I discuss various ways in which certain scholars paradigms, such as “ethno-politics” fail to take seriously the intellectual achievements of reform movements or the failures of Western-style political institutions in shaping truly democratic political arrangements in the East.

The advent of an anarchist political movement in Northern Syria in response to decades of totalitarian government and repression, implementing and practicing democratic confederalism as articulated in Abdullah Öcalan’s Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization is thus not merely a new iteration of ethno-nationalist or sectarian politics, nor can it be understood within traditional paradigms of democratization, but should be understood as a explicit and indigenously embraced reaction to the failures of the imposition of western-style nation states. Moreover, unlike political scientists who take for granted the prevailing institutional arrangements in Middle Eastern countries, or who approach the practice of ethno-politics from a constructivist lens which attempts to describe political praxis as non-ideological or “identity based”, I suggest that to attempt to analyze a political movement while ignoring its ideological foundations is a way of robbing Easterners of the ability to produce critical political thought. Paradoxically, the suggestion that one can study the development of a political movement such as Western liberalism while ignoring the writings of Locke, Rousseau, Hobbes, or Adam Smith, and other important intellectuals who played a key

role in the development of liberal thought would almost certainly meet skepticism. For this reason, I consider the serious analysis of political treatises which articulate the philosophical basis of the Rojavan Revolution to be an important first step in understanding the politics of its adherents.

The difference between this new articulation of democracy and the traditional understanding of democratic institution building articulated by the likes of Schumpeter and Huntington, as well as the problematic dynamics that state institutions have introduced have been the subject of some discussion already. The underlying political philosophy produced by political parties that consider themselves part of a larger democratic revolution occurring in the Middle East underscores the dominant political philosophy of Arab Nationalism, which until 1967 was a secure *modus operandi* for exercising political power, has resulted in a structural deficiency within the Arab state. The practice of state power under a hegemonic “Arab” identity resulted not in national liberation, but social fragmentation and a vector of interminable violence and sectarian infighting. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt lamented the dilemma of stateless persons in the 20th century attributing as the cause of their persecution “because they were born into the wrong kind of race or the wrong kind of class or drafted by the wrong kind of government.” Scholars such as both Larbi Sadiki have pointed out that the rise of “electoral authoritarianism” has hamstrung democratic development in the region.⁵

⁵ Larbi Sadiki, *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2009), <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199562985.001.0001/acprof-9780199562985>, page 10

Nicola Pratt points out that political parties in Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, have not represented “a conduit for contentious politics”, and that political liberalization in these countries sought to control and manage extent of political opposition. Janine Clark concurs with this view in a 2017 study of Jordanian and Moroccan politics, where she reveals how authoritarian rulers in Morocco and Jordan coopt political rivals and circumscribe the limits of acceptable political opposition, thus preventing the emergence of a contentious and democratic political system.⁶

Despite the considerable success of the region’s authoritarian regimes in assimilating and coopting political rivals, the ideological foundations of state power, in this case Arab nationalism, did not provide for the cooptation of political groups which were seen fundamentally as not belonging to the body politic, such as Assyrians and Kurds. This unassimilability became reflected in the literature on Middle Eastern ethno-politics, which primarily saw the democratic and anti-authoritarian movements of the regions minorities as projects of “ethnic nationalism” and obfuscated their democratizing tendencies, as well as their dialectic relationship to the ideology of Arab Ba’athism. There emerged a tendency to view the national liberation movements of the region as primarily sectarian and nationalist, eschewing study of both conflict within nationalist movements regarding crucial political issues such as sectarianism, gender equity, and economic policy, as well as ideologically leftist movements such as the one that emerged in Rojava. David Romano (2006) for instance, in examining the development of Kurdish

⁶ Janine A. Clark, *Local Politics in Jordan and Morocco: Strategies of Centralization and Decentralization* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

nationalism, identified political context, mobilization methods and identity as the primary factors contributing to the early success of the PKK in fighting the Turkish state.⁷ This constructivist approach to understanding the politics of the PKK suggest that the actual dynamic shifts in political ideology are less important than geopolitics, identity, and praxis. In fact, what this thesis demonstrates is that all of these elements are contingent on underlying ideology. The epistemic break between the old, Leninist PKK and the new, confederalist PKK has resulted in a major shift in all three of these elements. This further undermines the concept of “identity” as a motivating political factor, suggesting that identity is an ideological concept which is not inextricably linked to one’s ethnic or linguistic background, but is rather interlaid with certain ideological assumptions, such as nationalism. When the ideology of nationalism is rejected, so too are the organizing principles of ethnic identity.

Additionally, scholars have identified a “silent statism” within the literature that tends to view democratic transformation as the capture and reformation of existing states through largely non violent protest movements, rather than the transformation of local politics through the establishment of grassroots institutions with the capacity to resist and transform the state from below.⁸ As mentioned above in the works by Nicola Pratt and Janine Clark, the overemphasis on electoral politics as a force

⁷ David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸ Damian Gerber and Shannon Brincat, “When Öcalan Met Bookchin: The Kurdish Freedom Movement and the Political Theory of Democratic Confederalism,” *Geopolitics* 0, no. 0 (October 16, 2018): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1508016>.

for democratization ignores that electoral politics is often the locus of authoritarian cooptation and control.⁹ Revolutionary movements do not seek assimilation within existing power structures, but rather radical reshaping of such structures – meaning they must propose an ideological alternative to status quo power relations.

Öcalan's work and the movement based on his writings sought not to recreate the mirror image of Arab nationalism, but to subvert it entirely by offering an different articulation and practice of political relations. The Rojava Revolution is unique not merely because it instituted self-governance, but because it appeared to acutely identify and respond to the core ideological problems of both Arab nationalism, and the sectarian responses to Arab nationalism found in separatist movements across the region. The proposition of the Rojava Revolution is that the path to democracy lies not in further dividing the region along sectarian lines by responding to the authoritarian practice of Arab nationalism with Kurdish or Assyrian nationalism, but in dismantling the ideological foundations of nationalism in order to open new vistas for autonomous and democratic governance in the region not based on sectarian identity.

Scholars of contemporary nationalism, while recognizing the ideological foundations of nationalist movements, often ignore its discursive roots. For example, David Brown, in *Contemporary Nationalism* writes that “Contemporary nationalist

⁹ Nicola Christine Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Lynne Rienner Publishers Boulder, CO, 2007). and Clark, Janine A. *Local Politics in Jordan and Morocco: Strategies of Centralization and Decentralization*. Columbia University Press, 2018.

politics involves ideological confrontation between competing constructions of the nation. Groups and individuals within the same state differ as to whether they aim at a civic nation of equal individual citizens, an ethno-cultural nation of ethnic sameness, or a multicultural nation of equal status ethnic or ethno-regional segments.”¹⁰ This view effectively establishes nationalism as a discursive structure beyond which no conversation regarding politics can take place, while ignoring the fact that it is the structure nation-state politics itself which establishes nationalism as the chief discourse of legitimate politics. Meaning that political movements that challenge the discursive structure of nationalism itself do not fall into any of the categories that Brown describes.

Especially in the case of Iraq, Syria and Turkey, where the majority of the world's ethnic Kurds are located, contemporary nationalism was introduced through the organized production and spread of political ideology by Arab nationalist, whose ideologies had a particular historical genealogy. The influential work of Michel Aflaq,¹¹ who wrote the founding texts of Baathist ideology and enjoyed cult-like status in Iraq and Syria, is largely ignored, while the ideology of Ba’athism, a highly developed and systematic vision of Arab-nationalist politics, not dissimilar to Kemalist ideology as articulated by Gökalp¹², is viewed as secondary to understanding developments in Middle Eastern political movements. Elie Kedourie wrote, in the very first sentence of *Nationalism*, that “Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the

¹⁰ David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural and Multicultural Politics*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹¹ (1972), دار الطليعة للطباعة والنشر (عفلق، ميشيل، في سبيل البحث).

¹² Ziya Gökalp, *The Principles of Turkism* (Brill Archive, 1968).

19th century.”¹³ In contrast the much celebrated *Imagined Communities*,¹⁴ while admitting naturally the European origins of nationalism, makes no reference to the nationalists themselves - the political theorists, activists, writers and intellectuals who through their writing and political activism created the discourse of nationalism. Thus one can have nationalism without nationalists.

My suggestion here is that the failure to recognize nationalism as a discursive structure that reinforces certain limits on political discourse has both naturalized and reified that discourse in the national politics of many countries. By naturalize I mean that the underlying assumptions of nationalism are so deeply rooted in the national consciousness as well as that of political observers that it does not occur to political actors to look outside the confines of nationalist discourse for solutions to political problems. This means that any attempt to position oneself politically against the discourse of nationalism itself becomes increasingly difficult, because nationalism constitutes the central paradigm through which political discourse is framed. The failures of ethno-nationalist movements like the Kurdish independence movements in Iraq, Syria and Iran speak to the centrality of nationalist thinking among Middle Eastern political movements, even when those movements have attempted to oppose Arab nationalism,

¹³ Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4 edition (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993). page 9

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006).

they have done so by constructing a counterpoised nationalist discourse.¹⁵ Early Kurdish movements chose to rather to attempt to develop their own concepts of “national liberation” in opposition to the central state, leading to decades of bloody conflict in Syria, Iraq and Turkey.¹⁶ One of the major conclusions reached through the analysis of the events and ideology of the Rojava Revolution is that such a positionality is possible - it is possible to position oneself ideologically outside of the confines of the central paradigm of nationalism, and it is still possible to oppose nationalism as a political project, rather than merely work within its paradigmatic limits. This is the major contribution of Öcalan’s work, and suggests a significant evolution in the contours of the conflict among “ethno-religious” groups in the modern nation state system.

Indeed, Öcalan views the state as the primary obstacle to the development of democratic political institutions, rather than the vehicle by which it is achieved. He explicitly rejected nationalism and the state as constructs deleterious to human social organization, claiming that “The protective influence of the nation state towards the chauvinistic owners of the nation states screens their populations from the enrichment of modern democracy.”¹⁷ Moreover, he locates the vehicle for transformation in “A change in consciousness in the Middle East, which needs to be initiated by a historical process

¹⁵ Gunter, *The Kurds A Modern History*. “This sense of national community occurred at more or less the same time that Turks and Arabs also began to embrace an ethnic sense of identity in place of the two previous basic forms of solidarity - the idea of Ottoman citizenship and membership of a religious community, or *millet*.” page 2

¹⁶ Gunter. page 2

¹⁷ Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*, trans. Klaus Happel (London ; Ann Arbor, Mich: Pluto Press, 2007). page 15

similar to the Renaissance, the Reformation or the Enlightenment in Europe.”¹⁸ This attitude should not be confused however, with the largely modernist suggestion that the Middle East needs to “catch up” with Europe by adopting similar institutional arrangements. Rather the process that Öcalan envisions is largely a paradigmatic shift away from the chief European import into the Middle East: nationalist ideology. Thus he writes of the democratic project that must be undertaken “Europe forms the right wing of democratic civilization and is at the same time hold it back.”¹⁹

THE ROJAVA REVOLUTION

The Rojava revolution officially took place in June of 2012 when, following the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Kurdish cities in northern Syria, the TEV-DEM which seized control first of Kobane. This was followed shortly by the signing of the Erbil Agreement which gave the Democratic Union Party (PYD) de facto control over security and provision of services in Kobane. Though initially seen as a victory for the FSA which was fighting to overturn the Bashar al-Assad regime, the PYD subsequently denied entry into Rojava to the Free Syrian Army, much to the chagrin of Barzani aligned political parties that wanted to unite Syrian Kurdish political parties in the fight to overturn the Assad government. This violated the principles of government that the PYD and affiliated parties sought to implement in accordance with the ideology of democratic

¹⁸ Öcalan. page 16

¹⁹ Öcalan. page 17

confederalism, which focuses on “self defense” rather than traditional Leninist armed struggle against the state. Civil government in Rojava was founded on an exclusively anti-sectarian basis, and PYD intellectuals and officials have described the advent of the Democratic Federation of North Syria as an end not only of Ba’athism, but indeed of the nation state itself, a concept central to the writings of Öcalan.

Although there exists a burgeoning body of literature examining both Öcalan’s thought and the Rojava’s connection to European anarchism, much of this literature has yet to position the transformation of the PKK from a Marxist-Leninist militant group into its current anarchist iteration. Thomas Schmidinger’s *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan* (2015) provides the most detailed account of the movement and connects its ideological origins to region wide trends, including the failure of Iraqi Kurdistan to fulfill the aspirations of Iraqi Kurds, devolving into factionalism and clientelism, neo-liberal economic reforms and servitude to Turkish interests. Most importantly, Schmidinger acknowledges that sectarianism, particularly in Ba’athist Syria and Iraq as well as Kemalist Turkey, were not based on primordial sectarian divisions of identity, but were rather constituted the results of a political ideology that imposed nationalism on the major Arab states as a necessary precondition for achieving development.²⁰ Michel Aflaq combined elements of European fascism, Marxism and Arab nationalism in order to produce a political ideology which called for the dissolution of ethnic difference into a single national identity.²¹ Given the levels of ethnic and religious diversity in Syria and

²⁰ Thomas Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria’s Kurds* (Pluto Press, 2018).

²¹ ميشيل, في سبيل البحث

Iraq, such an ideology was doomed to result in totalitarianism through a one-party system. Thomas Schmidinger correctly positions Öcalan's thought and the Rojava revolution as a doctrine of political emancipation corollary to Ba'athist authoritarianism which had dominated the region since the 1960's. Nevertheless, Schmidinger does not provide a particular focus on the intellectual origins of Öcalan's ideas.

The key historical development which lead to the Rojava revolution was the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in February of 1999, four months after an agreement between Syria and Turkey saw him expelled from the former, and his subsequent imprisonment on Imrali Island. Influenced by the political thought of late American ecologist Murray Bookchin, as well as numerous other thinkers from Kropotkin, Foucault and Pierre Clastres, Öcalan developed in prison a systematic critique of the nation state resulting in the articulation of Democratic confederalism, which blended social ecology, feminism, libertarianism and anarcho-communism and adopted them to the history of the Middle East region and particularly the struggle of Kurds for self-determination and autonomy. Scholars such as Jongerden and Knapp (2016) have traced the origin of many of Öcalan's ideas as well as described their systematic institutionalization within the Rojava political system.²² Other scholars contributed to better understanding the importance and nature of the ideological transformation which the PKK underwent, and how it adopted its earlier confrontational organizing strategies to democratic

²² Joost Jongerden and Michael Knapp, "Communal Democracy: The Social Contract and Confederalism in Rojava," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 10, no. 1 (May 31, 2016): 87–109, <https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.29642>.

confederalism, while identifying the Rojava revolution as part of a second wave of agrarian revolutionary movements based not along the Leninist model of seizing state power. Can Cemgil in two separate articles has drawn attention to how the emergence of the Rojava political project problematizes the notion of a republican state as the ultimate protector of individual rights, as indeed the opposite has been presumed by mainstream research in much of the developing world.²³

Further work on studying the emergence of the Rojava cantons can offer definitive answer to the determinacy of essentialist notions of ethnic and sectarian identities often employed in the study of Middle Eastern political movements. In many cases, these analyses both reproduce Orientalist conceptualizations of Middle Eastern people as incapable of sophisticated political thought or organization, and simultaneously reproduces the authoritarian vision of Middle Eastern society, first conceptualized by the early Ba’athist nationalists like Aflaq who saw these distinct cultures as anomalies to be absorbed into the Arab state in service of its developmental goals. Recent events, including the Rojava Revolution, have suggested a new way in which to systematically consider Middle Eastern politics, one that pits transnational democratic movements against ossified, nationalist regimes based on feudalistic relations between the state and its unassimilable citizens. In this context, democratic confederalism promises to be a

²³ Can Cemgil, “The Republican Ideal of Freedom as Non-Domination and the Rojava Experiment: ‘States as They Are’ or a New Socio-Political Imagination?,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 42, no. 4–5 (May 1, 2016): 419–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453715624959>. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453715624959> Cemgil. and Cemgil, Can, and Clemens Hoffmann. “The ‘Rojava Revolution’ in Syrian Kurdistan: A Model of Development for the Middle East?,” May 19, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.190881968-2016.144>.

powerful tool to understanding the possibilities for democratic reform in the region, not through the institutionalization of Western European state-capitalism and representative democracy, but grass roots, ecologically base democratic councils which invite the most minute levels of participation from civil society.

The Rojava Revolution and its associated political discourses problematize the notion of “democratic consensus” proposed by Schumpeter and Huntington, by challenging the underlying discourses which legitimate certain fundamental elements of the nation state system. No serious study of of such political movements can be made without an understanding of the paradigmatic difference in political discourse and practice, and the new production of democratic theory emerging from the region. In other words, contra Huntington, there is still a political opportunity to articulate a discourse of democratic theory that positioned outside of the Western European paradigm. The significance then of the Rojava movement is that in articulating and practicing a new form of democracy, it is able to rescue the notion of democratization from both the totalizing discourses of Arab nationalism as well as the insistence of the Western academy that conversation on the topic is closed.

THESIS OUTLINE

Democratizing intellectual movements develop and propagate competing ethical and moral systems which create the organizational possibilities for the development of democratic institutions, and the grassroots institutionalization of such an ideology. Within any given political system, a certain amount of dissent is permitted, allow for the

cooptation of political rivals while preserving the ideological framework of authoritarianism. As continually emphasized in the works of Antonio Gramsci and Rudi Dutschke, revolutionary movements are successful not only through physical violence or force, but in reshaping and challenging the discursive hegemony of the state and the boundaries of legitimate dissent. The Rojava Revolution along with other protest movements must be analyzed and appreciated for its capacity to offer a complete alternative to hegemonic state discourses of Arab nationalism and electoral authoritarianism. This requires a serious inventory of the movement's ideological, social and institutional components.

The remainder of this work will be separated in three chapters. The first two chapters will position Öcalan's work in the context of its influences in European anarchism and postmodern social theory, analyzing the textual roots of Öcalan's political system in the works of Immanuel Wallerstein, Pierre Clastres, Michel Foucault, Murray Bookchin and major works on communalism. Chapter 3 will give a historical overview of the development of democratic federalism in Northern Syria with emphasis on the development of institutions which reflect Öcalan's political ideology. The conclusion will position the Rojava Revolution in the larger context of the Arab Spring and Middle East nationalist movements, with a goal of emphasizing democratic federalism's grassroots origins as a response to totalitarian forms of government in the Middle East.

Chapter 2: The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan - The Roots of Civilization

“Each stage of Civilization is arranged on the basis of a new fundamental paradigm. All this rearranging is a means of disguising, of obscuring and of enchaining those who are ruled.”²⁴

Abdullah Öcalan, Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume I

The experience of democracy as an institutional structure often embedded within authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, and moreover the use of “democratizing” rhetoric to justify enormously costly wars on Middle Eastern countries have generated a significant amount of mistrust regarding the very meaning of democracy itself. This initially manifested itself as supposed incompatibility between Islam and democracy, making democracy unattainable for Muslim majority countries.²⁵ This analysis was weak not only for the fact that the majority of the post-colonial authoritarian Arab governments are secular, and face significant challenges from religiously positioned protesters, as demonstrated by the emergence of the Morsi government in Egypt, but that it also ignores the possibility of an alternate, indigenous articulation of democracy which emerged from

²⁴ Öcalan, Abdullah, and David Graeber. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume I*. New Compass Press, 2015. page 117

²⁵ Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (Routledge, 2013). see also Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Penguin Books India, 1997.

intellectual developments occurring within Middle East itself. Such an articulation would necessarily contrast with the Western view of democracy as an institutional structure, or the incompatibility between Middle Eastern religious or cultural traditions and democracy by repositioning democratic discourse outside of the paradigmatic constraints imposed upon it by European intellectual hegemony.

In fact, I argue that the image of democracy presented by Ocalan in *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* is such an indigenous articulation of democracy, one which contrasts starkly with the Western democratic discourse I described earlier. This articulation of what Ocalan refers to as a “democratic civilization”, distinct from institutional democracy, has arisen largely on the Turkish left, but more particularly among the Kurdish population of Turkey initially and later in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, this *indigenous* concept of democracy emerged through the adoption and synthesis of influential European postmodern texts whose Turkish translations became influential among the Turkish left. The influence and popularization of these works is evidenced Abdullah Öcalan’s political thought following his imprisonment on Imrali island.

I additionally demonstrate that a significant shift in his political thinking occurred, and that his subsequent political writings constitute a dramatic departure from the original precepts upon which the political project of the PKK had been based. The traditional left in the Middle East has typically been occupied by Marxist-Leninist movements. However as a result of the influence of postmodern critiques of European capitalism and democracy, as well as a global decline in the perception of these institutions stability as a result of the Euro crisis and increasing levels of economic inequality, a epistemic shift is occurring in

the Middle Eastern Left on both the philosophic and political level. This epistemic shift has had a significant impact on the relationship between pro-democracy movements in the Middle East and authoritarian regimes. This ideological transformation is what gave way to the development of democratic confederalism in northern Syria (DFNS).

The importance of developing indigenous concepts of political emancipation in a post-colonial context cannot be overstated. The traditional discourse of modernity which attempted to encourage colonized countries to adopt the institutional structures and practices of Western Europeans relied on the accusation that indigenous articulations of knowledge were incompatible with modern notions of progress and that thus the only route towards development lay in adopting European political institutions. Within the academic literature, the assumption that reform movements were constrained by the discursive limitations of modernity remains current. The argument here is that it became a chief concern of indigenous authors to demonstrate that their critiques were neither reactionary or subservient to Western intellectual discourses of modernity. The historiography of Islamic reform movements, for example, still rests largely on the notion that the intellectual innovations of early reform scholars like Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) or Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) cannot be considered “indigenous” intellectual achievements because they interacted with Western writings and discourses to produce their work. For example in *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, Henri Lauziere writes,

*“In light of these considerations, there is no easy answer to the question of whether modernist Salafism is an indigenous Islamic concept. Strictly speaking, it originated in the Orientalist circles of France, but Western- ers and non- Westerners, Muslim and non-Muslim, all participated in its construction and commodification.”*²⁶

Lauziere provides no definition of “indigenous Islamic concept”, nor any justification for why a concept or body of political thought must be dismissed from consideration as “indigenous” by virtue of its relationship with other intellectual traditions, a notion which is based on both a hierarchical understanding of the relationship between Western and Eastern thought, which dismisses as merely derivative any notion or concept which was produced even under the slightest influence of a Western writer, while failing to to apply the same standards in reverse.

Despite the fundamental fallacy in attempting to evaluate the worth of an intellectual tradition based on its independence from other traditions, the critique provided an intellectual motor whereby indigenous authors were able to discover ways of positioning themselves outside of the discursive framework of Western modernity in order to parry the accusation that their critique of European institutions was merely “reactionary.” The notion of indigeneity thus is a critical part of Öcalan’s thought and synthesis. He was acutely aware that the hierarchical relationship which pervades and

²⁶ Lauzière, Henri. *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. page 233

indeed constructs our understanding of the relationship between intellectual and cultural production in the East and West must be dismantled in order for an original critique of the modern political system to be produced, and for that critique to result in a movement of social and political change. His goal is to develop what could be called “indigenous” conception of democracy; a conception of democracy which might transcend Orientalism, in the sense that it delinks notions of intellectual hierarchy from its synthesis of political concepts.

Other attempts to describe Ocalan’s political thought, despite proffering important contributions, have failed to recognize the underlying significance of his work by not positioning within a larger universe of competing conceptions of the political. The unique genealogy of Öcalan’s texts, in both structure and content, resemble integrate elements of anarchism as expressed in the works of the Russian anarchist philosophy Peter Kropotkin and the Bronx born social ecologist Murray Bookchin. However, Ocalan additionally integrates a critical understanding of both capitalism and ideology expressed in the works of Fernand Braudel, the philosopher of science Feuerabend, the French political anthropologist Pierre Clastres, and the democratic theories Leslie Lipson. In attempting to elucidate the genealogy of Öcalan’s political ideas, I do not intend to accuse his theory, as Orientalists have, of being derivative, or his processes to be lacking innovation. Instead, I hope to demonstrate how his synthesis of a variety of modern thinkers allows for the construction of his theses regarding what he refers to as “democratic civilization”, a concept which in Öcalan’s mind, must be decoupled from Western practices of representative democracy, which despite their accomplishments, failed to deliver the

promises of democratic civilization to mankind. Öcalan presents the Kurdish case as merely an example of the failure of liberal democracy to resolve the fundamental problems of human political organization.

It is noteworthy that the emergence of an avowedly anti-statist movement in the Middle East, based on a deep critique of the structural nature of the modern secular state, can be understood as consequence of certain uninvestigated notions inherent in modern governance, regarding which other scholars have already written. Saba Mahmood for example, in her study of Egyptian secularism, has argued convincingly that the emergence of religious minorities is a structural feature of secular governance.

“While Islamic concepts and practices are crucial to the production of this inequality, I argue that the modern state and its political rationalist have played a far more decisive role in transforming preexisting religious differences, producing new forms of communal polarization, and making religion more rather than less salient to minority and majority identities alike.”²⁷

Although Mahmood’s study focused on Middle Eastern religious communities, the same argument may be applied with little modification to the case of the so called “ethnic”,

²⁷ Mahmood, Saba. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton University Press, 2015. page 2

cultural or linguistic minorities. A prime feature of the modern state, à la Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, is the dispensation of liberties on the basis of individual rights, an exercise it undertakes while simultaneously reserving the sovereign right to intervene in social and communal life in order to “ease” tensions created by the inevitable inequality created by unequal representation. Demands for minority rights expose minority communities to accusations of disloyalty to the state, as they must emphasize their differences from the national state identity in order to qualify for such “special protection.” The case of the Assyrians in Iraq, the Egyptian Copts, Arab Israelis (not to mention Palestinians) and critically in this study the case of the Kurds all testify to the inherent deficiencies in the rationale of the modern secular state.

Consequently, the production of new intellectual vistas as well as an indigenous concept of democracy that decouples the concept of democracy from the institutions whose structural constraints have given rise to significant repression in the modern Middle East gains enormous significance for highlighting the failures of the state system, instituted in the Middle East by the colonial powers following World War I. Öcalan’s work is then an indigenous testament to the structural contradictions inherent in the state system, contradictions which can be found in any region of the world where states do not have the dubious fortune of an entirely homogenous society.

ENTER ÖCALAN

According to a biography of Öcalan published by the PKK, Öcalan was born in the village of Omerli, in south-eastern Turkey, before completing a degree in political

science at the University of Ankara and joining the civil services in Diyarbakir.

Influenced by the events of the 1971 coup and the continuing denial of Kurdish cultural rights in Turkey²⁸, he subsequently founded the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in the village of Lice in Diyarbakir, in 1978. It was not until 1984 that the PKK launched an armed insurgency in Turkey, by which time Öcalan was already living in Syria as a fugitive under the protection of the Syrian government, which, due to its tense relationship with Turkey and own strategic interests in subduing its native Kurdish population, feigned sympathy for the exiled leader.

Like many other countries of the region, Turkey's relationship with its minorities, particularly the Kurds, has oscillated between feigned tolerance and open hostility. The launch of hostilities against the Turkish government by the PKK began in 1984, following the passage of Law 2932 in 1983 which prohibited the use of the Kurdish Language, only repealed in 1999. Articles 141 142 and 163 of the penal code outlawed communist, pro-Kurdish or Islamist political organizing.²⁹ The result of the Turkish government's campaign against the PKK included the deaths of an estimated 30-40,000 people and the depopulation of some 2,500 hamlets.³⁰ According to reports by Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations, the PKK was also responsible for

²⁸ Panico, Christopher, and Human Rights Watch (Organization). *Turkey: Violations of Free Expression in Turkey*. Human Rights Watch, 1999.

²⁹ Panico, Christopher, and Human Rights Watch (Organization). *Turkey: Violations of Free Expression in Turkey*. Human Rights Watch, 1999. page 8

³⁰ Panico, Christopher, and Human Rights Watch (Organization). *Turkey: Violations of Free Expression in Turkey*. Human Rights Watch, 1999. page 10

significant violations, including “768 politically motivated assassinations.”³¹ However in the Turkish press, any mention of Öcalan or the PKK is prefaced by attaching sole and full responsibility to the Kurdish resistance for the 30-40,000 estimated deaths that have occurred since the beginning of the conflict in 1984, despite the fact that the vast majority of the victims were killed by the Turkish military junta and its successors, with support from the United States. Academic literature on the PKK is often littered with uninvestigated claims made by the Turkish government in its attempts to dismantle the organization, such as its involvement in the drug trade, where PKK members in Germany are accused of smuggling heroin. Even official reports admit that in fact, the PKK probably charges smugglers a tax to pass through territory over which it exercises de facto control, and tolerates the activity of drug smugglers rather than being directly involved in the trade itself.³²³³

The paragraph above is meant to demonstrate that even some of the basic facts regarding the history of the PKK, its ongoing activities, and those of its founders are the subject of considerable and impassioned dispute. The PKK is not the subject of this thesis, but the history of the YPD and various other Kurdish organizations which emerged to govern the autonomous DCNS in 2011 have been condemned for the ideological and alleged organizational associations with Öcalan and the PKK. These

³¹ Panico, Christopher, and Human Rights Watch (Organization). *Turkey: Violations of Free Expression in Turkey*. Human Rights Watch, 1999. page 10

³² “Brief Summary 2017 Report on the Protection of the Constitution / Facts and Trends.” Berlin: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2017.

³³ United Nations, and Office on Drugs and Crime. *The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment, 2011*. Vienna: UNODC, 2011. page 55

claims have justified Turkish incursions into DCNS territory during Operation Olive Branch, during which the Turkish military shelled and invaded Afrin before threatening Manbij.³⁴ Thus the question of what the YPD is and what its connections are to the PKK, in addition to understanding the ideological and political goals of both movements seem to be matter of significant international interest.

Öcalan remained in Syria until October of 1998, where the government of Hafez al-Assad declined on numerous occasions to expel the rebel leader from Syria. In 1993, Prime Minister Demirel flew to Damascus to attempt to negotiate the surrender of Öcalan to no avail, as Assad opposed Turkish incursions into Iraqi territory in attempts to dismantle Kurdish camps.³⁵ Under the Clinton administration, Turkey received significant military aid as an ally against Saddam Hussein, meaning the Americans readily turned a blind eye to mounting reports of human rights abuses and the cascading death toll.³⁶ As the de facto leader of the PKK in exile, Öcalan routinely called for negotiations, which the Turkish government consistently refused,³⁸ preferring instead to

³⁴ Human Rights Watch. "Syria: Civilian Deaths in Turkish Attacks May Be Unlawful." *Human Rights Watch*, February 23, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/23/syria-civilian-deaths-turkish-attacks-may-be-unlawful>.

³⁵ Cowell, Alan. "Turkish Premier Visits Syria to Mend Old Fences." *The New York Times*, January 20, 1993, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/20/world/turkish-premier-visits-syria-to-mend-old-fences.html>.

³⁶ Cowell, Alan. "Turks' War With Kurds Reaches a New Ferocity." *The New York Times*, October 18, 1993, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/18/world/turks-war-with-kurds-reaches-a-new-ferocity.html>.

³⁷ Darnton, John. "Rights Violations in Turkey Said to Rise." *The New York Times*, March 6, 1995, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/06/world/rights-violations-in-turkey-said-to-rise.html>.

³⁸ Kinzer, Stephen. "Kurdish Rebel Leader Renews His Call for Talks With Ankara." *The New York Times*, December 19, 1997, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/19/world/kurdish-rebel-leader-renews-his-call-for-talks-with-ankara.html>.

run a clandestine assassination campaign that erupted into a political scandal when an internal government report found that Turkish government officials were involved in the trade of illegal drugs and using casinos to launder the profits.³⁹ However in October of 1998, Turkey managed to convince Syria (by threatening military action against Damascus) to sign an agreement in which Syria pledged to cease its support for the PKK rebels and hand over Öcalan.⁴⁰

An international manhunt quickly followed, as Öcalan fled to Italy, where he was briefly detained before being released, when the Italian authorities refused to extradite him to Turkey.⁴¹ He then fled to Kenya, where, on February 15th of 1999, with the help of the CIA, he was captured and transported to Turkey to await trial.⁴² Öcalan was quickly sentenced to death. Following an appeal however, the European Court of Human Rights requested that his execution be postponed while it reviewed the case.⁴³ Following

³⁹ Kinzer, Stephen. "Turkish Inquiry Links Government Agents to Assassinations." *The New York Times*, January 26, 1998, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/26/world/turkish-inquiry-links-government-agents-to-assassinations.html>.

⁴⁰ Kinzer, Stephen. "Accord Set For Syria And Turkey." *The New York Times*, October 22, 1998, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/22/world/accord-set-for-syria-and-turkey.html>.

⁴¹ Stanley, Alessandra. "Turks' Anger With Italy Deepens Over Extradition of Rebel Kurd." *The New York Times*, November 19, 1998, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/19/world/turks-anger-with-italy-deepens-over-extradition-of-rebel-kurd.html>.

⁴² Kinzer, Stephen. "In Snatching a Fugitive Rebel, Ankara Wins Opportunities on Several Fronts." *The New York Times*, February 17, 1999, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/17/world/in-snatching-a-fugitive-rebel-ankara-wins-opportunities-on-several-fronts.html>.

⁴³ "CNN - Turkey Delays Execution of Kurdish Rebel Leader Öcalan - January 12, 2000," May 26, 2006. <https://web.archive.org/web/20060526031932/http://archives.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/meast/01/12/Öcalan.01/>.

the Turkish government's abolition of the death penalty in 2002, Öcalan's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.⁴⁴

According to the late Murray Bookchin's daughter, in April of 2004, Öcalan contacted Bookchin from prison with the help of his German translator after reading Turkish translations of Bookchin's works.⁴⁵ Öcalan had begun working on a multi-volume history of the Kurdish struggle in the Middle East that he would present to the European Court of Human Rights as his defense. The three volumes of the *Prison Writings* were published between 2007 and 2012, while the first two volumes of the four volume *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* were published in 2015. My analysis focuses on the *Manifesto*, as, while not differing very much in content, presents a more sophisticated arrangement and articulation of the various elements of Öcalan's critique, which in a differing fashion are present in *Prison Writings*

Some scholarly attention has been given to the Öcalan's work and its impact on the region, an effect which continues to manifest in unexpected ways. Knapp et al., for example posit an analysis of Öcalan's work based on a reinterpretation of social contract theory, while Hunt (2017) and Gerber et al. (2018) provided overviews of the connection between Bookchin's concept of social ecology and Öcalan's notion of democratic federalism. Housseini (2016) and Can (2016) both suggest that the "Rojava revolution"

⁴⁴ "CNN - Turkey Delays Execution of Kurdish Rebel Leader Öcalan - January 12, 2000," May 26, 2006. <https://web.archive.org/web/20060526031932/http://archives.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/meast/01/12/Öcalan.01/>.

⁴⁵ Bookchin, Debbie. "How My Father's Ideas Helped the Kurds Create a New Democracy." *The New York Review of Books* (blog), June 15, 2018. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/06/15/how-my-fathers-ideas-helped-the-kurds-create-a-new-democracy/>.

can function as an alternate mode of development in the Middle East, creating a paradigm shift away from the centralized and authoritarian state structures that have dominated Middle Eastern political life in the modern era.⁴⁶

Many of the most essential elements of Öcalan's thought remain unexamined and deserve scholarly attention as, despite Öcalan's Western influences, his synthesis constitutes a significant development in the quest for a resolution regarding the "problem" of political minorities in the Middle East. While Öcalan's critique and synthesis casts a wide net, eventually drawing in the instrumentality of modern sciences and the subjugation of women, the foundational element of the *Manifesto* is a critique of the nation-state which reflects an understanding of its underlying discursive elements described in the introduction.

DECONSTRUCTING THE NATION-STATE

Although Öcalan critique of the nation state rests partially within the works of major anarchist thinkers like Kropotkin, as well as Murray Bookchin, who articulated the theory of social ecology and democratic confederalism beginning in the 70's, his critique

⁴⁶ Stephen E. Hunt, "Prospects for Kurdish Ecology Initiatives in Syria and Turkey: Democratic Confederalism and Social Ecology," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 0, no. 0 (December 14, 2017): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1413120>.
Hunt., Gerber, Damian, and Shannon Brincat. "When Öcalan Met Bookchin: The Kurdish Freedom Movement and the Political Theory of Democratic Confederalism." *Geopolitics* 0, no. 0 (October 16, 2018): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1508016>.
Hosseini, Anahita. "The Spirit of the Spiritless Situation: The Significance of Rojava as an Alternative Model of Political Development in the Context of the Middle East." *Critique* 44, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 253–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2016.1199631>.

reflects a larger synthesis of postmodern critique, incorporating the works of the French historian and forerunner of systems-theory, Fernand Braudel. Öcalan proposed in *The Roots of Civilization*, the first volume of his defense before the European Human Rights Court, that “the body most resistant to democratic change is the state itself - to a large extent caused by its deeply rooted institutions and traditions, as old as civilization itself.”⁴⁷ As suggested earlier in the discussion of articulations of democracy as the institutionalization of certain forms of statecraft which seek to recraft the individual in the image of the state, this approach was relevant to Ocalan because of the particular ways in which the attempt to use liberal statecraft to create national identities in the Middle East has failed. In *Prison Writings*, Ocalan writes that

*“The initial development of the structures and establishments that make up a complex body politic doubtless amounts to a significant turning point in the history of humankind for all its negative and positive consequences. After all, any contemporary state shares its functional institutions with its Sumerian prototype.”*⁴⁸

What is striking about Ocalan’s approach is the attempt to articulate Asad’s critique of liberal governance in a wider historical approach. The “*body politic*” for Ocalan

⁴⁷ Öcalan, Abdullah. *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*. Translated by Klaus Happel. London ; Ann Arbor, Mich: Pluto Press, 2007. page 227

⁴⁸ Ocalan, *Prison Writings*. page 5

constitutes a construct of a statecraft whose origins have a deeper historical meaning. In contrast to the typical European historiography which traces emancipatory foundations of liberal governance to the overthrow of religiously based monarchies, Ocalan suggests rather than there is more continuity between the modern state and its historical antecedent. Consistent with arguments set out in *Prison Writings*, which Öcalan' submitted to the European Court of Human Rights as Öcalan' as his defense, in the first volume of the *Manifesto* he claims that "Just as Western Europe has turned the modern world into a cultural expansion region over the past four hundred years it was once the region of expansion of, initially the Neolithic culture from the Fertile Crescent, then the Roman civilization and finally the Christian revolution."⁴⁹

Öcalan conception of various manifestations of human political organization are informed by a shared hierarchical notion of power which was introduced through Sumerian culture. The historical critique he proffers aims to demonstrate first, the roots of hierarchical state power, which constitute the source of the democratic crisis through which modern society is passing,⁵⁰ and second, the instrumentalist notions of knowledge and society which arose throughout their development. Democratic confederalism is intended then as both an ideological reconfiguration and a institutional reimagination of forms of liberal state craft that require the hierarchical configuration of the body politic which Ocalan critiques as fundamentally oppressive.

⁴⁹ Öcalan, Abdullah, and David Graeber. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1*. New Compass Press, 2015. p.78

⁵⁰ Öcalan, Abdullah. *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*. Translated by Klaus Happel. London ; Ann Arbor, Mich: Pluto Press, 2007.page 220

Öcalan was influenced in adopting this historical approach by Fernand Braudel's notion of *la longue durée*. The historiographical approach introduced by the Annales school sought to identify long term patterns in the societal structures, often by challenging historically constructed notions of "breaks" between different periods which attempt to starkly periodize different historical epochs. For Öcalan, the history of the state a *la longue durée* "implies the period starting with the end of the fourth ice age and ending when it can no longer continue its physical existence due to some natural or nuclear disaster."⁵¹ Societies in this view cannot be viewed merely in terms of institutions and events, but are rather constituted by this *longue durée* society, which is evidence by historical memory contained in religious texts and ancient practices which persist despite a changing political and sociological landscape. Many institutions, such as the hierarchical modern state, have evolved from forms of hierarchical social organization that arose in early societies.⁵²

In section three, Öcalan moves from presenting his analytic framework to analyzing the formation of class society in the Sumerian state. He traces the origin of class society to the "administration of the city which formed the initial bureaucratic cast"⁵³ this was achieved as the priests presented themselves as the deputies of God" and by their monopoly on science." Through this analysis he can claim that "the foundations

⁵¹ Abdullah Öcalan and David Graeber, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1* (New Compass Press, 2015) page 82.

⁵² Öcalan and Graeber. page 83

⁵³ Abdullah Öcalan and David Graeber, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1* (New Compass Press, 2015). page 83

of science or lead during Neolithic period.” In his analysis then the ziggurat becomes the symbol of the “hierarchical class-based society, whose lowest level were the workers.

However, in conversation with Bookchin, who writes that

“The State, in the authentically finished, historically complete form we find today, could have emerged only after traditional societies, customs, and sensibilities were so thoroughly reworked to accord with domination that humanity lost all sense of contact with the organic society from which it originated.”⁵⁴,

Öcalan’s goal is to identify and distinguish different societal tendencies within a Braudelian society whose transformation to hierarchical state structure can explain the current structural failings of Middle East statehood. Drawing on the work of Maria Mies, who writes of “gynocentrism” in early patriarchies, he argues that the subordination of women constitutes an essential feature of capitalistic instrumentalism, which transforms conceptions of environments from integrated ecologies into loose matter to be used in production processes.

“The role of women had at a previous stage been more important as demonstrated by the prevalence of the mother goddess religion⁵⁵ and

⁵⁴ Bookchin, Murray. *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005. page 95

⁵⁵ It is important to note here that, despite his inability to access source material due to his confinement, Öcalan is not referring to the proposed Neolithic cult of the Mother Goddess which, upon revisiting archeological evidence at Çatalhöyük, is viewed with circumspection by scholars of Neolithic society (see

*interpretation of the female goddesses as guardians of Sumerian city states. However overtime the role of women became less important, as a male beast hierarchical bureaucratic Society was developed. Women now was an official public and private prostitute as well as a slave.*⁵⁶

“is the way for society itself to be enslaved thereafter all enslavement was based on housewifization.”⁵⁷

The notion of a transformed Sumerian society is echoed in *Ecology of Freedom*, where Bookchin, citing the scholar of ancient Sumer Henri Frankfort, writes that “the earliest city-states were managed by equalitarian assemblies...as the city states began to expand, the power to wage war was conferred on an *ensi* or great man.”⁵⁸ Borrowing this point from Bookchin, Öcalan suggests that the process of territorial expansion lead to the collapse of egalitarian institutions in early Sumerian culture that were preserved by their Neolithic Forerunners.

“After expanding upon the development of colonies which serve to provide their mother cities with raw materials goods and axes to trade in far-flung regions key to our analysis of physical rocks we can conclude the beginning of the

Hodder, Ian, ed. *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study*. 1 edition. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.)

⁵⁶ Öcalan and Graeber, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1*. page 105

⁵⁷ Öcalan, Abdullah, and David Graeber. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1*. New Compass Press, 2015. 116

⁵⁸ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005). page 136

Sumerian society was also beginning of the era of masked gods and disguised Kings.”⁵⁹

The development of patriarchal dynastic structures also heralded a subversion of earlier gynocentrism that pervaded Sumerian society. Following the subordination of women’s work, “thereafter all enslavement was based on housewifization.”⁶⁰ He also ascribes to patriarchy the tendency of early Sumerians position to develop dynastic structures, stating that the reason why republic and democratic systems have not developed in the Middle East is because “the initial states were based on theocracy and dynasties.”⁶¹

Ocalan’s problematization of the state rests fundamentally on the power of hierarchical structures to shape and mediate the historical subject in order to manufacture political legitimacy. While Talal Asad suggests this is a feature of the modern liberal state, Ocalan’s critique suggests it is a function of all state structures throughout history. Of interest in particular is the deployment of Braudel’s notion of *la longue duree* as a way of articulating a historical continuity between the premodern hierarchical state and the modern state. This ideological realization, the realization that previous iterations of the PKK had been trapped in a dialectical relationship to state power, constituted an important ideological shift which had far reaching impact for the PKK. For example in

⁵⁹ Bookchin, page 105

⁶⁰ Öcalan, Abdullah, and David Graeber. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume I*. New Compass Press, 2015. 116

⁶¹ Ocalan, page 109

2002, Ocalan published a volume of essays under the name *Çeteciliğe Karşı Mücadele* (The Struggle Against Partisanism)

“Understanding recent developments in the PKK as a new historical period in the Kurds and Kurdistan carries great importance. Real socialism and its organizational habits, which have moved in its initial ideological genesis, began to show its true face during this period.”⁶²

Although at this period he had developed doubts regarding the power of real socialism as a vehicle for political change, this earlier text contains somewhat less discussion of his later articulation of democracy. Nevertheless it suggests that the disillusionment with real socialism began when the PKK realized that struggle against the Turkish state during the State of Emergency would not achieve the transformation they hoped for. Democracy had to be a vehicle, but it had to be an articulation of democracy which not concede to the state the discursive power to define the rules of the game.⁶³

It behooves at this point in the discussion to pause to discuss why the historical approach employed by Öcalan allows an ideological escape valve from the constraints of dialectical materialism, which had provided the motivating ideology of the PKK since the beginning of its armed struggle in 1984. In volume 1 of *Prison Writings*, Öcalan writes

⁶² Abdullah Öcalan, *Çeteciliğe karşı mücadele*, 1. baskı. (Aksaray, İstanbul: Mem Yayınları, 2002). page 6 “Kürtler ve Kürdistan genelinde yeni bir tarihi dönem anlamına gelen bu yılların PKK”ını daha somut olarak değerlendirmek, hatta tanımlamak, doğruyu yakalamamız açısından büyük önem taşımaktadır. Başta ideolojik doğuştan taşınan reel sosyalizm ve düzen alışkanlıkları, bu yeni gelişme döneminde adeta maskesini atarak gerçek yüzüyle kendini göstermeye başladı.”

⁶³ Öcalan. page 257

that “It is time we acknowledge that an unwavering belief in scientific socialism does not automatically acquire analytical and rational guidelines for action, - any belief that turns into dogmatism, even if originally built on a scientific basis, obstructs our view on reality.”⁶⁴ Bookchin’s work on social ecology provided an alternative methodological structure based on fusing research in history, anthropology, archeology and biology into naturalistic vision of human political behavior. This strain of thinking, which runs parallel but methodologically distinct from theoretical approaches to liberal political science represented by the legacies of the likes of Hobbes, Kant, Rousseau, Locke, as well as the legacy of Marx and his adherents, is better represented by Proudhon, Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin. Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*, was an attempt to fight social Darwinism by assembling research by naturalist and biologists to demonstrate the centrality of mutual aid over competition in the survival of species. However, as we will see in volume 2, Öcalan’s thought introduces major innovations to traditional anarchist thinking and moreover, requires analytic consideration in light of the changed circumstances of social development that constitute “late modernity”, where class struggle in and of itself has to a certain degree lost theoretical and practical relevance. This explains Öcalan’s departure from the affected scientism of Marxist thought, as well as his critique of the provincial nature of early anarchist political theory, which attempted to naturalize material relations without critically engaging their ideological substructure. The failure to

⁶⁴ Öcalan, Abdullah. *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*. Translated by Klaus Happel. London ; Ann Arbor, Mich: Pluto Press, 2007. page 6

abandon materialistic notions of progress, which Marxism embraces, was a major shortcoming of early social theorists which condemned them to a Hobbesian war of all against all.

Thus despite the influence of Marxist critics of capitalist modernity and enlightenment thinking by members of the Frankfurt School, throughout his analysis Öcalan maintains that "a critique that focuses only on capitalist modernity will not lead to progress." Moreover he presents a critique of Marxism by suggesting that because class societies are a constituent to feature of civilization "it is extremely rare if not impossible, that's a revolution is achieved through the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat as in a few cases in which this has occurred" the new administration has usually been far worse than the previous oppressive and exploitative regime."⁶⁵

What then constitutes the main ideological departure that convinces Öcalan of the unworthiness of Marxist dogma? He suggests that the early socialists, though cognizant of the centrality of hierarchy and patriarchy to the modern structures of bourgeois capitalism, chose rather to harness its revolutionary potential than subvert its legacy.

"The founders of Socialism came to power through the culture of civilized society. Although they claimed to oppose this bloody exploitative heritage and

⁶⁵ Abdullah Öcalan and David Graeber, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume I* (New Compass Press, 2015). page 114.

claimed that they refuse to become a power resting upon it they fully embraced it.”⁶⁶

In other words, *real socialism* implicitly accepts the hierarchical nature of civilized society and weaponizes it in order to promote the class struggle - socialism thus suffered from historical short-sightedness which Öcalan attempts correct. Moreover, *real socialism* as praxis was constructed upon philosophical and ontological assumptions that remained unchallenged. For example, he points out that Marx’s notion of the exchange value of a commodity, as described in Volume 1 of *Capital*, fundamentally accepts the subject-object dichotomy of German idealism. “The opinion that the exchange value of a commodity can be measured by the workers labor has initiated a conceptualization period fraught with disadvantages. – the mental acceptance of the society’s commodification is to abandon being human.” While this attitude is reflected in the works of Hans Jonas, Adorno and others, it is best expressed in Bookchin’s *Ecology of Freedom*, in his discussion of the animistic attitude of premodern production practices.

“But not only was the natural "object" (living or not) a subject in its own right; so, too, were the tools that mediated the relationship between the workers and the material on which they worked. The "labor process" itself assumed the

⁶⁶ Öcalan, Abdullah, and David Graeber. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume I*. New Compass Press, 2015. page 117

*organic character of a unified activity in which work appeared as an element in a gestative process-literally an act of reproduction, of birth.”*⁶⁷

Marx’s analysis of capital ultimately failed to recognize that any reconfiguration of social relations or the production process that implicitly accepted the subject-object dichotomy as a fundamental philosophical or scientific assumption could not undermine modern instrumental metaphysics. This is a recognition Öcalan’ picks up from the Frankfurt school; “The abstract self, which alone confers the legal right to record and systematize, is confronted by nothing but abstract material, which has no other property than to be the substrate of that right.”⁶⁸

Thus the exploration of premodern metaphysics provides both a historical route to understanding the genesis of hierarchical or “state civilization” as Öcalan refers to it in Volume 2, as well as an escape route for theorizing what Öcalan refers to as “democratic civilization” which has a fundamentally different ontology. As contrasted with Öcalan’s history of the development and expansion of Sumerian civilizations and the cultures that it influenced of inculcated, Neolithic society was a “completely moral society” – “Sharing and solidarity amongst themselves were the fundamental principle of their morality – a morality that sustained the society.”⁶⁹ The stability of Neolithic society,

⁶⁷ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005).page 231

⁶⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007). page 20

⁶⁹ Öcalan, Abdullah, and David Graeber. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume I*. New Compass Press, 2015. page 145

which persisted for thousands of years, was due to the fact that its “ideological and material cultures seemed to have been in harmony with nature.”⁷⁰

A major point to which Öcalan’s gives clarification is an answer to the question of why morally based faiths could not challenge the development of material culture promoted by capitalist civilization. He writes

“The ground for capitalism might have been prepared intentionally or unintentionally by bringing the gigantic empires to collapse and by the monotheistic systems not turning their aims and structures into civilizational constructs”⁷¹

This, according to Öcalan, is due to the fact that the morally based faiths, which revolted against what they viewed as oppressive civilizations, sought only to promote their ideological culture, rather than attack the material foundations of the civilizations they inculcated. Religion was used as a mask to justify the expansion of material culture, however for Öcalan “these conflicts have their origins in civilization, and religion is only used as their disguise.”

Öcalan concludes Volume One with the assertion that “the main conflict is not only one of class division but as one at civilizational level. The historical struggle that can be traced back to at least five thousand years is essentially one between state-

⁷⁰ {Updating}page 144

⁷¹ Öcalan and Graeber. page 245

civilization and democratic civilization: the latter consisting of pre-state village and agricultural communities. All ideological military, political and economic relationships, conflicts and struggles occur under these two main systems of civilization.”⁷²

Two issues are at stake with regards to understanding the intellectual history of modern political movements in the Middle East. One is to reclaim the notion of intellectual indigeneity which has been used to disparage Eastern thought from the perspective of Western academics and Orientalists. The other is, through the exploration of Öcalan’s ideas which are the consequence not only of outside intellectual influences but additional the experience of revolutionary praxis, to understand the structural constraints and failures which explain the emergence of a radical anti-statist movement in the heart of the Middle East. Ocalan’s critique reflects an understanding that traditional modes of revolution in the Marxist Leninist model accept the state as the justifiable vehicle for revolution.

However, the state’s hegemonic power over the creation of historical selves recursively creates subordinated and therefore, undemocratic subjects. This is not merely an arcane issue of political emancipation, it is a fundamental contradiction within the discursive structure of liberal statecraft, as critique by Assad. In order to grant political rights, the state uses various methods of coercion to reconstruct a manageable civilian subject. The attack on collective identity outside of the structure of the state then becomes a fundamental feature of modern state governance, one that is shared by real

⁷² Öcalan and Graeber. page 250

socialist states, who employed innumerable coercive tactics to construct an obedient socialist subject. Ocalan's critique is fundamentally an attempt to describe the historical foundations of this civilization problem and its consequences for crafting a "democratic civilization."

Chapter 2 deals with Volume 2 of Öcalan's *Manifesto*, before transitioning to a history of the PYD and other political parties which have attempted to put Öcalan's thought into practice in Northern Syria during the Rojavan Revolution.

Chapter 2: Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization Volume 2: Capitalism

"The Greco Roman culture and civilization is wrongly interpreted as the start of Western culture. This culture and civilization did not emerge in the west or Europe for it to be called Western culture or civilization. All the major cultural milestones including the Christian medieval period, have their origin in the Middle Eastern cultures and civilizations, that is, in Mesopotamia and Egypt. We are trying to establish how a daisy-chain of a culture originating from a specific location and formed within the scope of Braudel's longue durée of fifteen thousand years has been funneled into Europe."

-Abdullah Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization*

“Our entire modern world is trapped in the net of Alexandrian culture and recognizes as its ideal the theoretical man, equipped with the highest intellectual powers and working in the service of science, a man for whom Socrates is the prototype and progenitor.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

In *Restating Orientalism*, Wael Hallaq writes of his agreement with Charles Taylor’s critique of the Is/Ought distinction,⁷³ which was echoed by the French Orientalist Rene Guenon, who in the essay “A Material Civilization”, writes

“The moderns, generally speaking, cannot conceive of any other science except that which deals with things that can be measured, counted, or weighed, material things that is to say, since it is to these alone that the quantitative point of view is applicable; and the claim to reduce quality to quantity is most characteristic of modern science.”⁷⁴

In taking up a critique of scientism, which Öcalan distinguishes from science itself, both Guenon and Öcalan inaugurate a need for methodological approaches to understanding human society which do not arbitrarily isolate whole realms of knowledge

⁷³ Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (Columbia University Press, 2018). page 161

⁷⁴ Renee Guenon, “A Material Civilization,” in *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity* (World Wisdom, Inc, 2005). page 18

(religious knowledge, in the case of Hallaq,) to secondary status. Öcalan's attack on scientism was influenced by his reading of the philosopher Paul Feyerabend. Like Bookchin, Kropotkin, and Bakunin, Feyerabend presents a critique of primitivistic interpretations developed in modern anthropology, of prehistoric civilization, expressed in his *Philosophy of Nature*. Feyerabend's arguably most important work, *Against Method*, opens with the famous line "Every culture, every nation, can build a science that fits its own particular needs." In doing so Feyerabend sought to demonstrate what Foucault and other philosopher's have described as the problematic relationship between knowledge and power which pervades modern scientific thinking, and its dogmatic methodology which occludes sciences which are constructed for non materialist or non instrumentalist means.

The Turkish translation of *Science in a Free Society* attained popularity in Turkey among both Islamists and members of the Turkish Left,⁷⁵ and plays a critical role in the development of Öcalan's thought. Influenced by the work of Feyerabend, Öcalan challenges the hegemony of western scientific discourse and thinking, and by converse, the inferiority of Islamic or Middle Eastern intellectual traditions, by demystifying the ideological underpinnings of the practice of western science, which is inevitably drawn into the exercise of state power and interstate competition, including its critical role within capitalism. The central thesis of *Science in a Free Society* is "that there must be a

⁷⁵ W. W. Cobern, *Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Science Education: An International Dialogue* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012).page 171

formal separation between state and science just as there is now a formal separation between state and church.”⁷⁶

However these philosophers also proposed a deeper problem with modern scientific thinking, namely, the ideological construction of man as the center of science. In the conclusion of *The Order of Things*, cited by Öcalan, Foucault writes, “As the archeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.” Foucault suggested that the current episteme, which constitutes the boundaries and organization of modern thought, played a role in constructing man as the central object of scientific inquiry, and he suggested that this tenuous situation would soon come to an end, that civilizational progress would require a new episteme.⁷⁷

Yet a critical issue emerges, namely the association between critiques of modernity and reactionary Islamism. It is theoretically and historically obtuse to suggest that all Islamist critiques are fundamentally reactionary, as this dialectic has been used to discredit Islamic reform based in legitimate and communitarian ethics. At the same time, Feyerabend’s work, translated into Turkish, has been instrumental in Islamist polemics against the Kemalist regime in Turkey. This has resulted in the perception of the “exploitation” of postmodernist critiques of modernity by Islamist thinkers, contrapuntally exposing leftist critics of modernity in Turkey to the same accusations of

⁷⁶ Paul Feyerabend, “How to Defend Society against Science,” *Other Books by the Same Author*, 1981, page 15

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Routledge, 2005). page 319

constructing modernity as a totalizing boogeyman, and narrowing the opportunity to construct critiques of Kemalist Turkey that proffer legitimate critiques of capitalism without sinking into reactionary or reductive alternatives.⁷⁸ As I suggest in Chapter 1 regarding Lauziere's work on Salafism, the employment of European thinkers in an indigenous critique of the nation state system in the Middle East raises anew the specter of "intellectual indigeneity," accusing the oriental intellectual of either borrowing from or reacting to Western intellectual innovations. Thus in constructing a critique of the nation state, Öcalan is faced with a challenge of navigating the Symplegades constituted by the constant standoff between discourses of modernity and their retractors. As suggested by the epigraph presented in the beginning of this chapter, Öcalan's historiographical and philosophical approach is not simply a regurgitation of previously iterated theories, but rather a synthesis of radical social ecology, enlightenment critique, political anthropology and *longue durée* historiography.

The second volume of *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* begins with a Feyerabend's assault on the "scientific method." Given that this volume is devoted to a critique of capitalism, Öcalan prefaces the introduction to this endeavor by discussing the failures of Marxism to provide an alternative system to capitalism. He suggests for example, that Marx failed to anticipate the way in which his work would be used to justify, albeit via different routes, the expansion of capitalism, such as China's

⁷⁸ Cobern, *Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Science Education*. page 171

authoritarianism.⁷⁹ According to Öcalan, we can attribute this to the “scientific” basis of *real* socialism, which is constituted by the same metaphysics as capitalism.

A point of clarification regarding Feyerabend’s principal contribution in *Against Method*: The distinction between intellectual and civilizational progress, advocated by Öcalan, and a dogmatic defense of the status-quo, is the distinction between science as part of an exploratory and inquisitive attitude towards human society and natural events which seeks to sincerely further human progress. The devolution of scientific inquiry into scientism, in which the production of results and the exploitation of ecological systems constituted science’s marriage with the state, was Feyerabend’s chief concern. “The hardest task needs the lightest hand or else its completion will not lead to freedom but to a tyranny much worse than the one it replaces.”⁸⁰

We would consequently err to associate Öcalan’s critique of scientism with the “reactionary” attitudes associated with Islamist critiques of capitalist modernity, the problematics of which I mention in my discussion of Lauziere. Öcalan suggests rather that the root of the conflict between the proposed categories of Western Rationalism and Islam lie not in a rejection of the latter to accede to civilizational progress, but rather a legitimate concern regarding the metaphysical, or rather lack of true metaphysical outlook inherent in modern scientific practice. Thus he writes “Science *based on the*

⁷⁹ Abdullah Öcalan and Radha D’Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*, trans. Havin Gunesser (Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017).page 25

⁸⁰ Feyerabend, “How to Defend Society against Science.”

subject object dichotomy is nothing but the legitimation of slavery...capitalism does not advanced science it only makes use of it.”⁸¹

The efforts of Marxists in undermining the class-based hierarchies failed to their failure in recognizing that “in the historical rise of capitalism a leading role is given to rationalism a branch of Western thinking that emerge concurrently with capitalism.”⁸² Similar to Feyerabend’s assertions in *Against Method*, Öcalan suggests that analytical intelligence emerged to occlude and suppress other ways of imagining intelligence and a “scientific” manner of organizing society. “If we look at how even in primitive lifeforms organize we can catch a glimpse of a marvelous element of intelligence.”⁸³ The attitude however of the rationalists was to dissolve the organic linkages between human intellect and other forms of organic intelligence, a sin committed by capitalists and Marxists alike. “The worst metaphysical approach is positivism with its attempt to explain the phenomenon of human being by separating and detaching it from the universe.”⁸⁴

Öcalan’s critique and the “epistemic break”, to use Bachelard’s term that occurred within the Kurdish liberation movement has often been associated with a shift from violent to nonviolent means, or an acceptance and acquiescence to the Turkish state, or the shift from a Leninist model of violently opposing state power to confederalist model

⁸¹ Öcalan and D’Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*.

⁸² Öcalan and D’Souza. page 40

⁸³ Öcalan and D’Souza. page 42

⁸⁴ Öcalan and D’Souza. page 44

of building competing democratic institutions that dissolve the state from within.⁸⁵ However the emergence of this anti-statist model deserves to be linked to both the influence of postmodern thinkers whose works were translated and widely read within Turkey as well as the historical development of the Kurdish struggle. The shift towards democratic confederalism as revolutionary model has not, in fact lead to a decrease in violent confrontation between the state and Kurdish elements, as demonstrated by the Turkish invasion of Afrin.

The instrumental nature of modern science however, cannot be separated from the development of religious institutions and praxis within Europe. According to Öcalan, “Philosophy and science bear profound traces of religion.”⁸⁶ However he accuses the “capitalist mentality” of separating science from philosophy and religion, again invoking Feyerabend’s work in arguing that science cannot or ought not be separated from notions of ethical practice which in and of themselves cannot be objectively found, but must be designed to suit the needs of the community applying the science.

Thus it was (secular) Protestantism , as proposed by Max Weber, that “prepared the mental grounds for capitalism and *morally* gave free passage to it.”⁸⁷ In attempting to draw on other intellectual traditions which explain the rise of capitalism, Öcalan seeks to

⁸⁵ Doctor Paul White, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Zed Books, 2015), page 155

⁸⁶ Öcalan and D’Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*.page 52

⁸⁷ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D’Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. 53

position the shortcoming of Marx's critique in a metaphysical attitude whose intent was to provide a "scientific" analysis of capitalism, overlooking the fact that basis of his hermeneutics, based in Hegelian idealism, provided an opening for and lead to the foundation of the German nation state, and indeed influenced a number of other nationalist thinkers from Ziya Gokalp to Michel Aflaq, by reifying in socialist praxis a materialistic and therefore anti-metaphysical historical outlook.

By contrast, modern philosophy in the Nietzschean tradition (Deleuze, Foucault) provided more substantive critique of capitalism by surpassing the limits of Kant's idealism. However these works have largely failed to make an appreciable impact on changing attitudes towards capitalism, by failing to articulate a concrete political alternative, instead focused on providing specific critiques to various aspects of capitalist modernity.⁸⁸ In his section on "economism," he critiques the scientific attitude taken both by capitalist economists as well as Marxists, pointing out that the attempt to develop a scientific critique of capitalism obfuscated the fact that economics itself was a discipline designed to provide theoretical justification for capitalism, and thus could not be used to present a critique surpassing the limits of its own domain.⁸⁹ Moreover, by reifying a pseudo-scientific approach to understanding capitalism, Öcalan understands these approaches to fundamentally limit the possibilities of reforming society. Thus, he not

⁸⁸ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D'Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. page 60

⁸⁹ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D'Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. page 73

only steers clear of but, in fact, openly indicts ideas like class struggle, writing that “The common opportunistic trend is to first acknowledge and define the masters and then to propose struggle to its servants. This is indeed the mindset that has frustrated all rights and labor struggles throughout history.”⁹⁰ By this he suggests that critiques of capitalism have neither achieved their goal of undermining the fundamental ideological assumptions that give rise to capitalist cultures, nor properly examined history in *la longue durée* à la Braudel in order to understand the civilizational “daisy chain” by which hierarchical structures emerging in the destruction of Neolithic society were imported into European capitalist modernity.

In order to demonstrate further that early civilization was not, as Marxists and other materialist philosophers presume, inevitably destined for capitalist modernity, he points to early evidence from studies of Sumerian society, in particular an analysis of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which he interprets as “depicting the struggle between the communal mother-based order or society, and the hierarchic patriarchal society.” Scholars have overlooked however that the very title of Öcalan’s work is a reference to Leslie Lipson’s 1964 work *The Democratic Civilization*, in which Lipson presents an elegant critique of the modern nation state as ill-suited to serve the increasingly complex problems of global society – “The nation state has become as ill-adapted to modern needs and therefore as surely doomed to disappear as the polis of the Greeks to the age of Philip and

⁹⁰ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D’Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. page 79

Alexander.” The parallels in modes of thinking and the attempt to reformulate the concept of democracy from its limited interpretation as a normative constitutional system establishing a statist society, are evident in Lesli Lipson’s work. After surveying the classical literature Lipson attests that the criteria of Greek democracy as understood by the Greeks was “Rule by the poor, exploitation of the rich, abolition of debt slavery and property qualifications for office, opportunity for individual talent irrespective of family status or wealth, etc.”⁹¹

Lipson identifies two factors in American politics which mirror to a greater or lesser extent those in Turkish politics, namely the importance of what is referred to as race relations (acknowledging the lack of any scientific basis for the notion of race) and what she refers to as the “power and prestige of commercial values”⁹² She writes, claiming that her goal has been not to simply analyze the features of the democratic state, but to “interpret the spirit of democracy” – that

“These (democratic) principles constitute a central feature of the democratic state and the values they embody give its quality to the democratic civilization. In a democratic milieu the power which the government must wield is not simply to be understood in behavioral terms as a process of certain determinate person reaching specific decisions on particular subjects. For that

⁹¹ L. Lipson, *The Democratic Civilization.*, 1st US-1st Printing edition (Oxford University Press, 1964), page 36

⁹² {Updating} page 42

*power is what the community has sanctioned through competition between alternative parties and policies and allows to be used in order to alter existing realities in the hope for something better. Power must therefore be understood in relation to the conditions which create it and the purposes to which it is directed.”*⁹³

In short, to understand democracy as merely the institution of representative institutions, is to rob from democracy its moral and philosophical underpinnings, which are to guide society to civilization – this approach views any end or policy sanctioned by whatever means by a voting public – as democratic by virtue of process, ignoring that ostensibly democratic institutions, particularly in countries like Turkey, have been directed at times to support the wholesale slaughter of those considered to be an inferior race under the ideology of nationalism.

Öcalan adapts Lipson’s critique in a more radical interpretation by conceiving of statist civilization and democratic civilization as antithetical and competing modes of development. “During this (early) stage in all societies we witness a similar contradiction: the democratic society and civilized society contradiction; or in more understandable and concrete terms, the contradiction of state and democracy”⁹⁴

⁹³ Lipson. page 54

⁹⁴ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D’Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. page 112

In many respects this thesis draws on the European anarchist tradition, however Öcalan, adapting it to his own purposes, presents a rarely cited example from the history of Early Islam, where the struggle to establish a republican democracy or a Islamic sultanate lead to early schisms among Muslims. “The tribal aristocracy wanted a sultanate similar to that of the Byzantines and Sassanids.”⁹⁵ Öcalan contrast this with “the struggle over whether the (Athenian) society should be a democratic or a civilized society” Consistent with the Frankfurt school and Braudel’s bottom up view of material history,⁹⁶ Öcalan defines civilization as the process of imposing ideological and economic superstructures on the underlying democratic and material cultures, a pattern which reemerges continually throughout history.

“Democracy is based mostly upon the substratum majority and multitudes that have been betrayed, oppressed and exploited mostly by the hierarchic upper-strata, whereas civilization is based mostly on the section of the upper strata that pursue the oppression exploitation and ideological hegemony.”

Öcalan’s democratic civilization, like Lipson, is one which rejects the hierarchical structure of the state as a tool for imposing capitalism on the substratum majority in direct contradiction to natural democratic impulses. - calling for “political theory to at least determine and define a state that is open to democracy, that is, a state that does not

⁹⁵ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D’Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. page 112

⁹⁶ Öcalan and D’Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. page 116 - “Braudel openly states that capitalism is anti-market, a monopolist plunder externally imposed on the economy.”

ban real democracy or consider itself to be the epitome of democracy”⁹⁷ This attempt to decouple “state” and “civilization” from society, was influentially presented by Pierre Clastres in his famous collection of essays. He writes

*“Primitive societies are societies without a State. This factual judgment, accurate in itself, actually hides an opinion, a value judgment that immediately throws doubt on the possibility of constituting political anthropology as a strict science. What the statement says, in fact, is that primitive societies are missing something - the State - that is essential to them, as it is to any other society: our own, for instance. Consequently, those societies are incomplete; they are not quite true societies - they are not civilized - their existence continues to suffer the painful experience of a lack - the lack of a State - which, try as they may, they will never make up.”*⁹⁸

Clastres’s insights were influential in Öcalan’s development of the concept of democratic civilization in contrast with statist civilization. Moreover, the influence of Clastres’s work, which marked a major turn in anthropology at the time, constitutes a significant advance over the work of the Frankfurt School, which in keeping with the academic consensus at the time, viewed hierarchical organizations as originating in

⁹⁷ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D’Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. page 116

⁹⁸ Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley and Abe Stein, Reprint edition (New York: Zone Books, 1989). page 188

“primitive” divisions of labor between men and woman.⁹⁹ “The error of Adorno is reflecting patriarchal attitudes informed by Marxism onto a society which perhaps had none - division of labor in and of itself is not a patriarchal endeavor, only when it is infused with power relations along the lines of gender does it acquire its hierarchical meaning.”¹⁰⁰ In this revised anthropological outlook, the development of “state civilization” and consequently capitalism can be traced through the shared inheritance of a diachronic chain of civilizations sharing similar structures.

Thus, Öcalan distinguishes what he calls “Democratic Civilization” as a teleological period beyond the modern era, in which the hierarchies adopted from preexisting Sumerian, Egyptian, Classical and European societies are overcome. “The fundamental contradiction is between the civilization with state monopoly and the democratic civilization of stateless society. This difference between the state civilization and civilization with democracy can best be seen in the two ancient Greek city-states of Sparta, administered by monarch, and Athens, administered by democracy.”¹⁰¹

Öcalan’s changed views of the role of state and its relationship to Braudel’s notion of economy appear to be instrumental in his radically changed perspective regarding the proper course of revolutionary action. Whereas the Leninist model calls

⁹⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, page 16 “The men tracked prey while the women performed tasks which did not require rigid commands. How much violence preceded the habituation to even so simple an order can- nor be known. In that order the world was already divided into zones of power and of the profane.”

¹⁰⁰ Öcalan and D’Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*, page 154

¹⁰¹ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D’Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. page 258

upon revolutionaries to take control of the state by force in order to dismantle class oppression, promising in turn that because the state is a tool of class oppression, by instituting the dictatorship of the proletariat, the state will “wither away”, as its *raison d’être* vanishes,¹⁰² Öcalan’s view is that the state can only be a tool for imposing economic monopolies in the Braudelian sense. Consequently, as has seemingly been demonstrated by numerous historical examples, particularly the Russian and French cases, it is only when state power is dissolved through the establishment of competing, democratic institutions outside the states purview (i.e. democratic councils) that state power and its economic monopoly can be simultaneously undermined.¹⁰³ However how can we contrast this with the anarchist notions proposed by Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin? He objects to the anarchist tradition lying within the critique of state power for failing to identify the multiplicity of factors and aims for which states are instituted, particularly its connection to the enforcement of capitalism. “The definition of the state as an art of administration and management is as dangerous as moral interpretations because it ignores all the other factors and disguises the real essence of the state.”¹⁰⁴

This definition of the state as “statecraft” or a “tool of management” closely reflects the view of Talal Asad and Huntington. Huntington and Schumpeter admit and

¹⁰² See Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Penguin Books Limited, 1992). “In striving for socialism, however, we are convinced that it will develop into communism and, therefore, that the need for violence against people in general, for the subordination of one man to another, and of one section of the population to another, will vanish altogether since people will become accustomed to observing the elementary conditions of social life without violence and without subordination.”

¹⁰³ Öcalan and D’Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. page 265

¹⁰⁴ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D’Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. 194

indeed celebrate the institutional intricacies of modern liberal democracy as a tool for managing diverse populations. As described by both Ocalan and Asad, the state as a tool of mediation is an inevitable threat to individual autonomy, as it requires what Asad calls the “mediation” between the self and the transcendent national “identity”.

However this definition of state was insufficient for Ocalan because it merely answers the how, and not the why, of state power. Öcalan aims for a more expansive definition of state that identifies the historical links between capitalism and the state as posited by Braudel, in order to give meaning to the motivation behind organizing society in such an exploitative and hierarchical manner. According to Öcalan : the fundamental failing and shortcoming of the anarchist contribution to socialism was defining capitalism as a purely economic system and not fully understanding its civilizational and power roots, as well as their inability to break the molds of modernity.¹⁰⁵

This newly adapted notion of political emancipation is a critical departure from the Marxist tradition in which Öcalan originates. This is because the Industrial Revolution created a set of circumstances in which the notion of class struggle was no longer relevant. “Energy for the first time was not dependent on manual labor. Machines possessed an engine design that removed most of the need for manual labor.... The consequences for both nature and society of these new forms of energy and machinery, with millions of different varieties, are not yet fully known, but are mostly negative.

¹⁰⁵ Öcalan and D’Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*, page 314

Therefore the defense of society and nature was no longer a class or even a social struggle” it became an ontological question.¹⁰⁶ Öcalan synthesizes Bookchin’s major contribution of recognizing the transformation of the social question from a question of opposing a particular social arrangement because of hierarchic dimensions and recognizing the ontological significance of a capitalistic society whose extractive dimensions threaten the ecological stability upon which continuing human existence rests.¹⁰⁷

What Braudel meant by the anti-market as explained by Wallerstein, is that through his inverted analysis of material culture, Braudel revealed that what is referred to as capitalism is in fact the anti-market- a continuing chain of monopolists and speculators whose activities and networks constituted what Braudel referred to as true capitalism, which he distinguished from economy, which constituted the vast array of daily material culture practiced by society’s substratum. As Wallerstein remarks in an essay “Braudel on Capitalism,” this view radically changes the historiographical agenda, as it interrupts the traditional periodization held by both traditional Marxists and liberal economists, who view the development of capitalism as related to the emergence of the bourgeoisie, i.e. a city dwelling middle class operating in a free market. If, as in Braudel’s configuration, the capitalist is the monopolist, acting to ensure the highest level of profit and thereby opposing the free market forces, this presents an opportunity for a redefinition of the

¹⁰⁶ Öcalan and D’Souza.page 272

¹⁰⁷ “Global Warming of 1.5 °C —,” accessed March 19, 2019, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

relationship between state power and capitalism as functioning against “democratic civilization.”¹⁰⁸ Drawing from Braudel Öcalan suggests “That is state and power view economy as an area where the produced surplus product and values can be squeezed out, and where they establish their monopoly”¹⁰⁹

Following this logic, in order for statist civilizational structures to be undermined and replaced with democratic civilization, a major revolution in thought on par with the European Enlightenment is required in Middle Eastern countries. However, this will neither be the same European Enlightenment but one located within Islamic and Middle Eastern intellectual traditions and hermeneutics. “If the Middle East is not able to realize its own enlightenment, then it cannot develop its own thought revolution. An analysis of the Prophet Muhammad could be the first step in this thought revolution.”¹¹⁰ Without undoing the epistemic Gordian Knot of the modern state, without challenging the instrumentalization of scientism as an epistemic tool of modern statecraft, without unravelling the subject-object orientation of modern philosophic systems, such a revolution is deemed by Öcalan as impossible.

¹⁰⁸ Immanuel Wallerstein, “Braudel on Capitalism, or Everything Upside Down,” *The Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 2 (1991): 354–61.

¹⁰⁹ Öcalan and D’Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. page 265

¹¹⁰ Öcalan, Abdullah, and Radha D’Souza. *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. Translated by Havin Guneser. Place of publication not identified: New Compass Press, 2017. page 171

DEFINING DEMOCRATIC CIVILIZATION

To suggest that societies without states lack states is to suggest that the development of states is an inevitable occurrence in human cultures. The reverse view, that the development of state civilization to use Öcalan's term, is a particular historical and civilizational development linked to a "civilizational daisy chain" which transferred these structures from Middle Eastern cultures into European capitalist modernity opens new vistas for understanding political transformation.

If state civilization is a marriage of the monopoly power of capital to the hierarchical structures inherited in Öcalan's civilizational daisy chain, how then do we arrive at a definition of democracy based on Öcalan's critique? "Whilst the state excludes society by putting these affairs under its own jurisdiction and , therefore, they become the justification for state's legitimacy, democratic society on the other hand proposes or ensures that these common affairs are taken care of by society as a whole."¹¹¹ Rather than liberal democratic legitimacy, which in Öcalan's configuration is closer to Asad's definition of liberal statecraft, a combination of coercive and non-coercive tactics to manufacture the "citizen" as a subject self-identifying with state power, true democratic governance requires as a matter of definition the *active* and non-hierarchically based participation of society, and the elimination of coercive means of liberal statecraft, among which is nationalism. This contrasts starkly with liberal democratic or social contract

¹¹¹ Öcalan and D'Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*. page 307

theory, which sees democratic society as established on the exchange of individual rights for state legitimacy, in order to contravene *bellum omnium contra omnes*.

“Whoever undertakes to institute a people must feel himself to be in a position to change, so to speak, human nature; to transform each individual, who by himself is perfect and solitary, in part of a larger whole of which this individual receives in some manner his life and his being; to alter the constitution of man in order to reinforce it, to substitute a partial, moral existence for an physical and independent existence which we have received from nature”¹¹²

Rousseau himself admits of what Ocalan suggests is the fundamental injustice of liberal governance, its need to “change human nature” and “transform each individual.” Rousseau’s contract theory suggests that “society” only arises from political arrangements, rather than preceding it - moreover political society arises from agreements between individuals- whereas Öcalan’s formulation suggests that the state as an institution must be dialectically contrasted with society, which is itself collectively rather than individually conceived. This contrast is further sharpened by Ocalan’s insistence that the state as such ought not to have power to “transform the individual” in order to construct the body politic.

¹¹² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Le Contrat Social, Ou, Principes Du Droit Politique* (P. Pourrat, 1839). “Celui qui ose entreprendre d’instituer un peuple doit se sentir en état de changer, pour ainsi dire, la nature humaine; de transformer chaque individu, qui par lui-même est tout parfait et solitaire, en partie d’un plus grand tout dont cet individu reçoit en quelque sorte sa vie et son être; d’altérer la constitution de l’homme pour la renforcer; de substituer une existence partielle et moral à l’existence physique et indépendante que nous avons tous reçue de la nature.” page 53

Rousseau's formulation additionally relies on a somewhat arbitrary separation between *moral* existence which can occur only within political institutions (echoing Hegel's *Philosophy of State*) and *physical* existence, which is presumed to be anarchic, primitive and backwards. In Öcalan's conception, society, which precedes the state, has constitutive democratic elements whose presence can be historically demonstrated through correctly practiced anthropology and historiography. Governance ought to be instituted in such a way as to preserve and elevate democratic civilization. The praxis of democratic civilization is then the defense of society against the state and other hierarchical structures.¹¹³ Revolutionary praxis additionally relies on discursive resistance to history which is written to marginalized democratic elements.

“Just as the state represents the nucleus of the state civilization, the primitive communal order is the nucleus of the democratic civilization. This alone shows us how strong the democratic roots are. The subject of written history is state civilizations. The fact that societies have lived in communal orders for millions of years, taking care of their own affairs, does not fall within the scope of this history.”¹¹⁴

¹¹³ See for example Nazan Üstündağ, “Self-Defense as a Revolutionary Practice in Rojava, or How to Unmake the State,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 197–210, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3425024>.

¹¹⁴ Öcalan and D'Souza, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*, page 308

Chapter 3: History of Democratic Confederalism in Syria

“ To emphasize the preeminence of contemporary society in history is, subtly, to elevate a deadening, homogenizing mass media over the spiritual yearning elicited by religious ceremonies, a mechanistic scientism over a colorful mythopoeic sensibility, and an icy indifference to the fate of one's immediate neighbors over a richly inter- twined system of mutual aid. Now that torture has returned to the modern world as a rationalized technique for interrogation and punishment, the medieval rack has become picayune by comparison. And while modern society no longer drags its heretics to the stake, it incinerates millions of utterly innocent people in gas chambers and nuclear infernos.”

-Murray Bookchin, The Ecology of Freedom

My goal in this chapter is to demonstrate the relationship between the epistemic break that occurred in Öcalan's theory of revolutionary change and the rise of democratic confederalist institutional structures in Rojava during the Rojavan revolution. In fact,

democratic confederalism as a transformational element predates the 2011 Rojavan Revolution, particularly within Turkey. The transformation of the PKK's revolutionary practice inside Turkey, which following the capture of Öcalan intensified, has had a reverberating effect within Turkish activism - for example the establishment of anarchist collectives in eastern Turkey and the establishment of new anarchist periodicals such as Black Crow, the first volume of which emerged in 2011.¹¹⁵ The popularization of both anarchist and democratic confederalist attitudes in eastern Turkey is closely linked to the gradual establishment of institutions, publications and networks facilitate the spread of political discourse. The historical genesis of these movements is an outgrowth of the failure of modern statecraft in the Middle East to succeed in its goal of “mediating” the individual, in the words of Asad. The ethno-nationalist movements which emerged from the oppression of the nationalistic attitude of Middle Eastern statecraft and there subsequent failure lead to the articulation of a new Turkish Left, which rather than advocating for state capture sought to dissolve elements of state power as such.¹¹⁶ However, it remains an important question whether there is any way to institutionalize a mode of governance that does not require the kinds of statecraft that Öcalan so detests.

One particular critique posed by opponents of communalism is that without the ability to “mediate” the individual or to construct a “national identity” which eases the process of governance in large democracies, it would be difficult to convince a diverse

¹¹⁵ Ideas&Action, “Interview with Turkish Anarchists,” *Ideas and Action* (blog), March 2, 2011, <http://ideasandaction.info/2011/03/interview-with-turkish-anarchists/>. March 2, 2011.

¹¹⁶ Asef Bayat, *Ortadoğu'da Maduniyet: Toplumsal Hareketler ve Siyaset* (İstanbul: İletisim Yayincilik, 2015).

population to not set their interests against one another. The origins of the idea of democratic confederalism as an alternative governing structure meant to solve this problem can be traced to a 1990 article by Murray Bookchin, published in volume 20 of *Green Perspectives*, in which he articulated the theoretical problem of decentralization, which lead to accusations of parochialization leveled against early anarchist thinkers like Proudhon, i.e that decentralization leads to formation of mutually antagonistic local interests.¹¹⁷ Confederalism proposes a solution by creating “a network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, whose function is purely administrative¹¹⁸ and practical, not a policy making one.” Policy making by contrast “is exclusively the right of popular community assemblies based on the practices of participatory democracy.” By this Öcalan sought to design a system which “democratizing interdependence without surrendering the principle of local control.”¹¹⁹

The first two chapters of this thesis help elucidate some of the theoretical issues regarding the commune system of Rojava. For example, Jongerden and Knapp (2016) use social contract theory to analyze the new political structure - despite the radical differences between traditional social contract theory and the commune structure in Rojava, as discussed in the conclusion of the last chapter.¹²⁰ Rather than the individual, or

¹¹⁷ Murray Bookchin, “The Meaning of Confederalism,” *Green Perspectives* 20 (1990): 1–7.

¹¹⁸ Bookchin.

¹¹⁹ Bookchin.

¹²⁰ The term “social contract” appears in the Constitution of the Rojava Cantons as a translated synonym for constitution or charter, and has no direct connection to formal social contract theory.

the family, the basic element of political organization in Rojava is the commune. Although the residual practices of the bureaucratic state have reportedly dogged attempts to completely democratize the decision making process, the commune provides an alternative, non-hierarchical space for the discussion of community issues.¹²¹ The absence of the punitive state has benefited peacebuilding efforts through the implementation of peace and reconciliation councils (PRCS) in the Cezire canton.¹²² Moreover, historical ties to earlier activist and ecological organizations were found to be instrumental in developing awareness of the importance of social ecology as a synthetic practice of confederalism through the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement.¹²³

In 2007 the PKK incorporated Öcalan's ideas into the KCK (Association of Communities in Kurdistan -Koma Civakên Kurdistan), established in the "Declaration of Democratic Confederalism" written by Öcalan for the 5th Congress of the Kongra-Gel (*Kongra Gelê Kurdistan* – Kurdistan People's Congress) which was held in May of 2007 in Qandil. This new umbrella organization, ideologically replaced the KKK, which had been in existence since 2005.¹²⁴ Following the reorganization, the KCK initiated a marked shift in Turkish politics, including the establishment of the pro-Kurdish party,

¹²¹ Ali B, "Eroding the State in Rojava," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 1 (February 19, 2016), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/610227>.

¹²² Yasin Duman, "Peacebuilding in a Conflict Setting: Peace and Reconciliation Committees in De Facto Rojava Autonomy in Syria," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 12, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 85–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2017.1285245>.

¹²³ Stephen E. Hunt, "Prospects for Kurdish Ecology Initiatives in Syria and Turkey: Democratic Confederalism and Social Ecology," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 0, no. 0 (December 14, 2017): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1413120>.

¹²⁴ "Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan - Free Media Library," accessed March 25, 2019, http://www.freemedialibrary.com/index.php/Declaration_of_Democratic_Confederalism_in_Kurdistan.

Demokratik Toplum Partisi (Party for a Democratic Society). In Turkish local elections of March 2009, the party captured 100 Kurdish cities and towns, mainstreaming Kurdish politics in the Turkish political system.¹²⁵

The development of confederalist institutions in Northern Syria however, followed a different route. The PYD was established by Salih Muslim, having formerly been a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria, a Barzani aligned political party that had been violently repressed by the Syrian state since the 60's.¹²⁶ In March of 2004, large riots broke out in Qamishli between supporters of rival Arab and Kurdish football teams, allegedly after Kurdish fans were seen holding aloft signs praising Bush for his invasion of Iraq, which was seen by Kurds as a major factor in increased Kurdish independence in Iraq.¹²⁷ This led to a major crackdown on the PYD, due to the Syrian government's belief that they were behind the Qamishli riots as well as other incidents of public unrest that had occurred.¹²⁸ Moreover, in contrast with other Syrian Kurdish parties, that had operated at times with the tacit consent of security forces, the Bashar al-Assad government viewed the PYD as a particular threat due to its association with

¹²⁵ Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy," *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey*, no. 14 (June 1, 2012), <http://journals.openedition.org/ejts/4615>.

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch (Organization), Sarah Leah Whitson, and Ian Gorvin, eds., *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2009).

¹²⁷ "Football Fans' Fight Causes a Three-Day Riot in Syria," *The Independent*, March 15, 2004, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/football-fans-fight-causes-a-three-day-riot-in-syria-5354766.html>.

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch (Organization), Whitson, and Gorvin, *Group Denial*. page 42

Abdullah Öcalan, and the strategic importance of the 1999 Adana agreement which provided for security cooperation between Turkey and Syria with the caveat that Syria cease allowing Öcalan and his political constituents to operate within the borders of Syria.¹²⁹

Even prior to the revolution and the establishment of the Democratic Confederation of Northern Syria, the PYD was well understood to have significant support among the local Kurdish population because of the popularity of Öcalan's ideas. Because of the history of repression of Kurdish political activities in Syria, details on the founding of the PYD remain somewhat shrouded. However, Abdullah Öcalan's brother Osman Öcalan, has previously claimed that he was responsible for the founding of the party, on the instructions of Abdullah Öcalan. The task was initially assigned to Murat Karayilan, the current leader of the PKK, before Osman was selected for the task¹³⁰. From 2006 to 2011, dozens of PYD activists were arrested and imprisoned by the Syrian government as part of its cooperation with Turkey under the Adana Agreement.

As part of its Program of Self-Administration, the PYD declares that the current crisis occurring in Syria is not merely one brought about by an excess of corruption or other such factors, it is rather constitutive of the nation state itself as a form of

¹²⁹ Human Rights Watch (Organization), Whitson, and Gorvin. page 43

¹³⁰ Ferit ASLAN / DİYARBAKIR, (DHA), "Osman Öcalan: PKK ve PYD'nin akli olsaydı, Barzani'nin peşinden giderdi," accessed February 12, 2019, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/osman-Öcalan-pkk-ve-pydnin-akli-olsaydi-barzaninin-pesinden-giderdi-25074456>.

governance, as well as the underlying ideology of the state. It states that the current “explosion of popular movements” is due to the “bankruptcy of the project of the state, and the ideology of nationalism. By recognizing that the failure of the nation state ideology in providing a truly democratic society to Syrians, it further connects the Kurdish issue to problems which underlie the nation state, in an attempt to counterpoise the thesis-antithesis that nationalist ideology plays against minority communities.

As I have suggested earlier, the epistemological break in Ocalan’s ideology from the separatist-nationalism that the PKK and other earlier Kurdish political parties advocated for, to democratic confederalism, is based on a new recognition that that earlier debates and conflicts regarding the status of ethnic minorities had in fact been limited and mediated by the larger discourse of nationalism, and what Ocalan calls “state civilization.” As I have revealed in my analysis, the function of what Talal Asad calls “liberal statecraft” is to to manufacture a transcendent conception of the self, which shapes practices of political citizenship in order to create what is called in the modern state system “democratic legitimacy.” As Ocalan describes and as is admitted by the major liberal thinkers, the state is not democratic in the sense that authority flows directly from the people, but rather the state must, as Rousseau says “recreate human nature” in order to manufacture a citizen that will “consent” to rule, whether in strictly authoritarian or democratic political modes. Detractors from this view will claim that there is a major difference between liberal democracies and the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, but here I concur with the views of Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, who argue that the

similarities in the use of various coercive or non coercive techniques, suggest that these differences are to some degree exaggerated, since even liberal democracies rely on notions of “national identity”, to attempt to create legitimacy among a diverse body politic. It is worth remarking that the mostly highly surveilled societies are the US and Britain.¹³¹

The goal than of dissolving the state is to attempt a major reformation in this conception of modern statecraft. Democracy is viewed by the PYD as autonomy from coercive or non coercive influence by state institutions. Given its history of oppression by the Syrian security apparatus, and the influence of the work of Ocalan on the ideological contours of the movement, this break from nationalist-separatism to democratic confederalism is not surprising. In its charter the PYD states that rather than being based on ethnic nationalism, it proposes government based on “face to face” (to use Bookchin’s term) democratic volunteerism.

The PYD faces a significant challenge in attempting to institutionalize a form of democracy that is fundamentally suspicious of the kinds of democratic institutionalism championed by the traditional liberal vanguard represented in the likes of Schumpeter and Huntington. The PYD names as “The Democratic Solution” the writing of a constitution which does not seek merely to balance power among branches of government, as the very notion of hierarchical power must be viewed as anti-democratic

¹³¹ “Britain: The Most Spied on Nation in the World - Telegraph,” accessed April 20, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1533054/Britain-the-most-spied-on-nation-in-the-world.html>.

within itself. Thus, the purpose of a truly democratic constitution is “to create the possibility of peaceful coexistence between the institutions of the state and the institutions of democracy without prejudice to either.”

They go on to state that the democratic society will not be able to develop without “getting rid of the ideological hegemony which is defined by pure and dogmatic mechanical materialism which is imposed by the system of capitalist modernity on the world.” Moreover, they identify as the new source of hegemony “cooperation with the regions dictators”. Key Enlightenment concepts which undergird theory of democratic government, derided by Ocalan, are identified by the PYD as a “societal disease.” They suggest for example that liberal individualism, which Ocalan views as a manufacture element of state society, is “a denial of historical society, and thus the source of the collapse and disintegration of society.” The democratic civilization proposed by the PYD is thus distinguished ideologically from democratic capitalist modernity in that it regards as essential the role of conscience and ethics, which originate in religion, and without which “society transforms into a bestial and dangerous tool.” In this sense the PYD’s political ideology closely reflects the distillation of Öcalan’s political writings.¹³²

In May of 2011, the PYD joined the Kurdish Patriotic Movement, and in July it the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, as well as the People

¹³² PYD, “Program of Self-Administration (Arabic),” accessed February 14, 2019, <http://pydrojava.net/arabic/%d9%85%d8%b4%d8%b1%d9%88%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a5%d8%af%d8%a7%d8%b1%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b0%d8%a7%d8%aa%d9%8a%d8%a9>.

Council of Western Kurdistan, which was aligned with the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), and umbrella organization whose goal is to implement democratic confederalism.¹³³ In 2011, the PYD joined the KNC, a Barzani aligned umbrella organization designed to coordinate activities between various Kurdish parties in Syria.¹³⁴ On June 20th, of 2012, Syrian forces began to withdraw from Kurdish majority towns including Girke Lege in the Hasakah province, turning over control to the native Kurdish majority.¹³⁵ On July 22, the fourth city of Derik in northeast Syria fell into the hands of the PYD. Although most cities were liberated peacefully when government forces withdrew to engage in intense fighting around Damascus, YPG units launched assaults on government agencies in Afrin and Cideris, near Aleppo to gain control.¹³⁶ Qamishli, the largest Kurdish city in Syria, was liberated following negotiations with the central government.¹³⁷ In accordance with the Erbil agreement, signed by major Kurdish parties including the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdish National Council (KNC) then began to negotiate the organization of local government, allowing for joint control over

¹³³ Eyup Can, "PKK Changes Leadership," Al-Monitor, July 14, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/07/structural-leadership-changes-pkk-turkey-kurds.html>.

¹³⁴ ADIB ABDULMAJID, "KNC Invited to US to Discuss the Kurdish Issue," *Rudaw*, June 29, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120629084355/http://www.rudaw.net:80/english/news/syria/4728.html>.

¹³⁵ "Rudaw.Net - English - Girke Lege Becomes Sixth Kurdish City Liberated in Syria," November 29, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121129100410/http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4992.html>.

¹³⁶ "Kurdish City of Dêrik in Syrian Kurdistan Liberated from Assad Regime," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/7/syriakurd545.htm>.

¹³⁷ "Syrian Qamishli City Liberation from Assad's Security Forces Is a Matter of Hours: Kurdish Leaders," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/7/syriakurd546.htm>.

liberated Kurdish towns under a governing coalition known as the Kurdish Supreme Committee.¹³⁸

However, despite the Erbil agreement which provided for joint government of Kurdish regions liberated from the central Syrian government, the PYD acquired a larger amount of leverage due to its popularity and the strength of its armed wing, the YPG, which gained control over checkpoints in and out of Kurdish cities in Syria.¹³⁹ The PYD prevented Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces from entering Kurdish areas, insisting on autonomy rather than joining the fight against Assad.¹⁴⁰ This was largely a response to the refusal of the Syrian National Council to accede to the principle of self-determination for Kurdish areas.¹⁴¹ Mounting tension between the Syrian government and local authorities lead to clashes between protesters and government forces in the city of Qamishli.¹⁴² By 2013, the greater popularity of the PYD, which advanced a message of building a multi-ethnic governing coalition in opposition to ceding control to Kurdish nationalists, established political dominance over Rojavan towns in the form of its control over popular assemblies,¹⁴³ leading to the obsolescence of the Kurdish Supreme

¹³⁸ “Sixth Kurdish City of Girke Lege Liberated in Syrian Kurdistan From Assad’s Forces,” accessed December 12, 2017, <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/7/syriakurd550.htm>.

¹³⁹ “More Kurdish Cities Liberated As Syrian Army Withdraws from Area,” *Rudaw*, July 21, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120721142617/http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/4978.html>.

¹⁴⁰ “Armed Kurds Surround Syrian Security Forces in Qamishli’,” *Rudaw*, July 22, 2012.

¹⁴¹ “New SNC Leader: Talk of Federalism Causes Fear and Anxiety,” *Rudaw*, July 8, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120708015403/http://www.rudaw.net:80/english/interview/4854.html>.

¹⁴² “Looking Into: The Future of Rojava,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs* (blog), accessed November 12, 2017, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/news-item/looking-into-the-future-of-rojava/>.

¹⁴³ Robert Lowe, “The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria,” in *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014), 225–46, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137409997_12.

Committee as a governing force in Rojava.¹⁴⁴ Government of the newly autonomous regions split into a Barzani aligned movement, the KNC, and a PYD aligned movement, - the Movement for a Democratic Society -TEV-DEM. The Syrian government released over 600 prisoners who had been arrested in relation to organizing activities with the PYD.¹⁴⁵

In January of 2014, the Afrin, Jazeera and Kobani cantons of Rojava declared their independence, following the approval of the Rojavan Constitution.¹⁴⁶ Rojava gained international fame during the period from 2014-2016 following the Siege of Kobane,¹⁴⁷ in which a coalition of PYG, PKK and leftist elements of the Syrian opposition captured the besieged city from ISIS control. The ability of YPG forces to capture and hold territory lead to the declaration of the de facto independent Democratic Federation of Rojava, uniting the individual cantons in northern Syria under the control of the PYD.¹⁴⁸ Despite Rojava's control over 25% of Syrian territory, negotiating parties at the Geneva talks refused to allow for PYD participation.¹⁴⁹ The announcement met round

¹⁴⁴ "Qamishli to Be Capital City of Jazeera Canton in Syrian Kurdistan," accessed December 5, 2017, <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/1/syriakurd1028.htm>.

¹⁴⁵ Mohammad Ballout, "Syrian Kurds Trade Armed Opposition for Autonomy," Al-Monitor, June 23, 2012, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/06/syrias-kurds-oppose-the-regime-y.html>.

¹⁴⁶ "Qamishli to Be Capital City of Jazeera Canton in Syrian Kurdistan."

¹⁴⁷ "Battle for Kobane: Key Events - BBC News," accessed December 5, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>.

¹⁴⁸ "Syria's Kurds Declare de-Facto Federal Region in North," accessed December 5, 2017, http://www.apnewsarchive.com/2016/Syria%27s_Kurds_declare_de-facto_federal_region_in_north/id-882b101de1024e63bd9525bb32c708e3.

¹⁴⁹ "Syria Civil War: Kurds Declare Federal Region in North | News | Al Jazeera," accessed December 5, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-civil-war-kurds-declare-federal-system-north-160317111902534.html>.

condemnation from the Syrian government, opposition forces and alienated Kurdish nationals.¹⁵⁰ In 2016, following the expansion of the Rojavan territory TEV-DEM declared the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria encompassing and uniting newly annexed regions and dropping the term Rojava.¹⁵¹

The Syrian government called the Democratic Union Party's recent sweep of local council elections¹⁵² "illegal unilateral action,"¹⁵³ while Iraq, Iran and Turkey expressed concern of regional Kurdish uprisings.¹⁵⁴ In 2016 Rojava abandoned its separatist aspirations in its new constitution¹⁵⁵ and currently advocates for a federalist system in Syria that grants local autonomy while maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria,¹⁵⁶ though the central government continues to lambast its elections.¹⁵⁷

In order to ensure the emergence of a democratic confederalist system of government in Northern Syria, PYD activists had to contend with a powerful branch of Kurdish political parties that is both embedded in traditional nationalist ideological

¹⁵⁰ "Syria Civil War: Kurds Declare Federal Region in North | News | Al Jazeera."

¹⁵¹ "Syrian Kurds Declare New Federation in Bid for Recognition," Middle East Eye, accessed December 5, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurdish-pyd-declares-federalism-northern-syria-1311505605>.

¹⁵² Sputnik, "Encamên Hilbijartina Li Rojava Hat Eşkerekirin," accessed December 8, 2017, <https://krd.sputniknews.com/suriye/201712057060948-Encam-hilbijartin-rojva/>.

¹⁵³ "Damascus Denounces Local Elections of Rojava as 'Unilateral Action,'" Rudaw, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/011220171>.

¹⁵⁴ "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East," Chatham House, accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/18205>.

¹⁵⁵ KEDISTAN, "Document • Constitution • Le Contrat Social Du Rojava," KEDISTAN, January 30, 2017, <http://www.kedistan.net/2017/01/30/constitution-le-contrat-social-rojava/>.

¹⁵⁶ "Syrian Kurds Declare New Federation in Bid for Recognition."

¹⁵⁷ "Rojava Ruling Party's List Sweeps Local Council Elections," Rudaw, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/05122017>.

discourse and supported by the formidable political and military infrastructure of the KRG. The KNC, which until its dissolution was the administrative coalition governing the autonomous region, was formed under the auspices of Masud Barzani in 2012 in Erbil, the intent of which was to unify the Kurdish parties in opposition to the Assad government and advocate for a federal arrangement similar to that which the KRG enjoys with Baghdad, based on the Kurdish majority population of Northern Syria. The PYD and other aligned parties in the KNC however rejected the creation of a government based on ethnicity, due to their opposition to the ideology of nationalism. At a conference held in Cairo in July of 2012, as Kurdish areas were being liberated from Syrian government control, fighting broke out over the issue of granting authority powers to a coordinating committee that was proposed to organize the various factions in a united front against Assad.¹⁵⁸ The move would have represented a significant blow to attempts by the PYD to both exercise control over the autonomous regions as well as potentially halt progress on the implementation of democratic confederalism. However, talks between the Syrian opposition and the KNC stalled over the issue of identifying Syria as an “Arab Nation.”¹⁵⁹ The main divide between the PYD and the KNC was the PYD’s refusal to ally itself with the Syrian opposition, and its focus on “self-defense” rather than overthrowing the regime.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ “Fights Break out at Syrian Opposition Meeting,” *Reuters*, July 3, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-opposition-idUSBRE86213V20120703>.

¹⁵⁹ “Syria’s Kurds Stand Alone after Rejecting Rebels and Regime. By Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi,” accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/7/syriakurd548.htm>.

¹⁶⁰ “Rift between Syrian Kurdish PYD and Kurdistan’s Barzani Deepens,” accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/11/syriakurd940.htm>.

The ideological connection between the PYD and the PKK later lead to a Turkish effort to support Masoud Barzani's attempts to gain more control over northern Syria.¹⁶¹ The Turkish government, beginning in 2013, supported the KNC as a rival to PYD's supremacy in Syria, which lead to an escalation of tensions. By late 2013, one of the most prominent and influential Kurdish leaders, openly rejected the prospect of autonomy for northern Syria, after the PYD declared an autonomous government in Syria.¹⁶² In the decision, the PYD isolated other elements of the KNC which sympathized with Barzani¹⁶³

The PYD specifically rejected various elements of traditional nationalist Kurdish politics in a bid to support a multi-ethnic governing coalition including the regions Arab, Turkmen, Yazidi and Assyrian minorities.¹⁶⁴ By 2014, the KRG had declared that it would not deal diplomatically with the autonomous cantons of Cizire, Afrin and Kobani.¹⁶⁵ The decision by the PYD to declare an autonomous region was viewed as a threat to traditional Kurdish nationalist politics, the ultimate goal of which was to create an independent Kurdish state, or barring that, a network of federalized regions similar to the KRG in Iraq.¹⁶⁶ By pursuing a governing policy based on democratic confederalism,

¹⁶¹ "Rift between Syrian Kurdish PYD and Kurdistan's Barzani Deepens."

¹⁶² "Massoud Barzani Rejects Syria's Autonomous Kurdish Government," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/11/state7492.htm>.

¹⁶³ "Syria Kurds Announce Transitional Autonomous Kurdish Government in Western Kurdistan," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/11/syriakurd942.htm>.

¹⁶⁴ "Massoud Barzani Rejects Syria's Autonomous Kurdish Government."

¹⁶⁵ "Iraqi Kurdistan Govt Says It Won't Deal with Cantons in Syrian Kurdistan," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/2/state7741.htm>.

¹⁶⁶ "In Whose Name Did Iraqi Kurdistan Govt Make the Decision Not to Recognize Syrian Kurdistan Cantons," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/2/state7751.htm>.

which specifically rejects that construct of the nation state, the PYD upended the anticipated trajectory of Kurdish independence.

In response to the intransigence of the KRG on the issue of recognizing the independent Cantons, the Rojava Coordination, a civil society organization based in Syria, called upon the KDP, the leading Kurdish party in Iraqi Kurdistan, to recognize the autonomous administration.¹⁶⁷ Despite accusations of only representing a factional government in the region, the Rojava Coordination garnered the support of 91 independent political parties and societal organizations, emphasizing in its appeal that traditional geopolitics were impeding the opportunity to implement a democratic society in the region.¹⁶⁸ Barzani's stance towards the PYD proved unpopular even among traditional Kurdish parties, as demonstrated when the largest opposition parties in the KRG denounced the KDP's policies towards Rojava while demanding the recognition of the Rojava cantons.¹⁶⁹

Conflict over the radical democratic project undertaken in Rojava reached a peak when the Barzani controlled KDP administration of the KRG began to fortify borders between Syria and Iraq Kurdistan, despite a long tradition of along relatively unmolested transit across those borders.¹⁷⁰ Meanwhile, Barzani continued to accuse the PYD of

¹⁶⁷ "Rojava Coordination Calls on Iraqi Kurdistan's KDP to Recognise the Cantons in Syrian Kurdistan," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/3/syriakurd1097.htm>.

¹⁶⁸ "Rojava Coordination Calls on Iraqi Kurdistan's KDP to Recognise the Cantons in Syrian Kurdistan."

¹⁶⁹ "Barzani's KDP Strengthens Embargo on Syrian Kurdistan, Opens Fire on Protesters," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/4/syriakurd1130.htm>.

¹⁷⁰ "KCK Statement on Iraqi Kurdistan KDP's Policy towards Syrian Kurdistan," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/4/turkey4990.htm>.

collaborating with the Assad government, despite the fact that by 2014 many elements of the FSA had splintered into right-wing Islamist movements that the PYD actively fought in Kobane.¹⁷¹ The PYD's decision to resist aligning with international actors in Syria was justified in the wake of revelations that elements of the FSA and US backed opposition forces had splintered into right-wing terror groups like Al-Nusra Front.¹⁷²

IMPLEMENTING DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

Following the emergence of the PYD as the preeminent political force in Northern Syria, their task became to implement confederalist structures. Democratic confederalism, as described in Chapter 2, relies on a strict separation between policy making, which is controlled at the local level, and coordination in a confederalist structure. The lower level is composed of neighborhood assemblies, which appoint delegates to send to the city assembly. Legislative power is vested in the city assembly, which determines policy and passes laws. Village assemblies within a given province function autonomously, except in cases where major decisions concerning an entire province need to be made, in which case village assemblies send delegates to the city assembly.

This structure emerges and functions autonomously of state institutions, and thereby constitutes a manner of mollification of state authority, both by relocating

¹⁷¹ "Kurdistan President Barzani Accuses Syrian Kurdish PYD of Collaborating with Assad Regime," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/4/state7902.htm>.

¹⁷² Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-trump.html>.

legislative authority away from state bureaucracy and delegitimizing the roots of state power by promoting a message of autonomy. This is described by the PYD as a system of “parallel authority”, whose ultimate goal is to eliminate the state not through violent overthrow but gradual, institutional erosion of state legitimacy.¹⁷³ In Turkey, the above described structure is coordinated by the Democratic Society Congress, which coordinates between various Kurdish organizations in Turkey, including hundreds of civil society organizations, political parties and syndicates. The remaining members are composed of delegates from village assemblies. In Turkey, the provincial assemblies organized under the DTK played an important role in mainstreaming Kurdish candidates for Turkish parliament.

Another critical aspect brought of democratic confederalism involves the foundation of new villages or the transformation of existing villages based on communitarian ideals stressed by Öcalan. However, despite the ideological and tactical transformation of Kurdish politics since the capture of Öcalan, the Turkish state has not relented in its policy of suppressing Kurdish political activities and attacking the democratic confederalist project in Turkey as well as in northern Syria. Kurdish activists and politicians are routinely targeted with politically motivated arrest and accusations of terrorism.¹⁷⁴ The pretext used is that because the KCK is the umbrella organization under which confederalist structures are organized, and because the PKK is an affiliate of the

¹⁷³ PYD, “Program of Self-Administration (Arabic).”

¹⁷⁴ Kurdistan24, “Turkey Arrests over 150 Kurdish Politicians, Journalists, and Activists,” Kurdistan24, accessed March 27, 2019, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/939789af-29fd-43d8-9a33-297ae922d1a6>.

KCK, anyone associated with the KCK (meaning nearly any politically active Kurd in Turkey) can be linked to the PKK and thus accused of terrorism. Inside Turkey, confederalism proposes regional forms of autonomous and local government in which cultural and ethnic differences express themselves openly without state interference or the threat of nationalism. This reflects a philosophical transformation proposed by Öcalan, who adopted it from Murray Bookchin's interpretation of the phrase "unity of differences."

"In organic societies the differences between individuals, age groups, sexes-and between humanity and the natural manifold of living and nonliving phenomena-were seen (to use Hegel's superb phrase) as a "unity of differences" or "unity of diversity," not as hierarchies. Their outlook was distinctly ecological, and from this outlook they almost un-consciously derived a body of values that influenced their behavior toward individuals in their own communities and the world of life."

Confederalist structures thus seek to promote this philosophical outlook within a governing framework emphasizing the right of communities to defend themselves, as well as the right of multi-ethnic societies to associate based on the principle of "unity-in-difference" in which individual culture is expressed rather than suppressed. As demonstrated by the conflict between the PYD and Barzani-aligned Kurdish groups, the advent of democratic confederalism as an organizing principle of Kurdish politics necessarily deemphasizes nationalism as an organizing concept, and threatens the

political projects associated with nationalist movements in the Middle East. At the same time, it has created a significant opportunity for a radically different approach to organizing democratic governance among a diverse population, one that emphasizes the ills that statism and nationalism have engendered in the region, not the least of which is the oppression of Yazidis, Assyrians, Turkmen, and the Arab left at the hands of oppressive nationalist governments. As has been suggested by Öcalan, the semi-feudal nature of Kurdish politics in Iraq Kurdistan, continued military attacks on villages in Northern Syria by Turkey, which considered the threat of democratic confederalism as a structure challenging and undermining state sovereignty within its own borders as a major regional threat, all pose significant challenges to the prospect of a continuing emancipatory project.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

As I argue in the introduction, the Rojava Revolution is the result of a new articulation of democratic change emerging both from an epistemic break in the political and ideological thought of influential figures like Abdullah Ocalan, as well as the failure of modern statecraft to address the demands of ethnic and religious minorities. The transformation in political ideology which occurred as the result of the influence of post modern and anarchist intellectual traditions on the Turkish left has significantly altered the contours of Kurdish politics with major consequences for regional politics. However, due to the fact that the democratic ideology advocated by confederalist political parties is based on a critique rather than an acceptance of modern theories of liberal governance, its philosophical elements remain poorly understood.

Öcalan's arrest and imprisonment, rather the marking the end of the political movement he began in 1984, appeared to have triggered a shift in both the practice and ideology of Kurdish politics across the region, in Turkey and in Syria. This transformation has roots in similar emancipatory projects in European history, such as the

Levellers during the English Civil War, the 1871 Paris Commune, and Revolutionary Catalonia. Öcalan's political writings, however, prolonged his de facto leadership and influence in the democratic confederalist movement established a new philosophical basis based on a critique of capitalism and modernity emerging from Bookchin's theory of social ecology and a synthesis of various post-modern authors whose work was popularized by the Turkish left during the post 1980 coup period. These developments have resulted in a major epistemic break between traditional ethno-politics and a new emancipatory framework that cuts across various ethnic, social and religious groups.

Moreover, Öcalan's work reflects a unique synthesis of major works of postmodern thought into a sustained and comprehensive critique. This synthesis was then distilled into a sustained political project which emerges from outside of the central domain of liberalism. Rather than producing an immanent critique of the modern condition by suggesting that the solution to the woes caused by the institution of the nation state and the advent of capitalism to the region might be solved by "completing" the project of modernity, as is suggested by the likes of Jürgen Habermas, Öcalan proposed a new political project which, while not relying on anachronistic notions of traditionalism or fundamental religiosity, proposed a means of political emancipation that rescues the notion of the "democratic civilization" from the jaws of hierarchical structure built around it. In this sense Öcalan managed to create a realm of political thought which is at once democratic and decidedly non-Western in spite of his interest in and use of Western philosophy. Öcalan's concept of the democratic civilization is one which redeems the autonomy of the individual and the community and sanctifies them in a

decentralized political structure. It rejects the instrumentalist attitudes of capital accumulation, promoting instead sustainable ecology.

Such a reformation, as Bookchin and Öcalan emphasize, an attempt to recapture an earlier animistic attitude towards nature thereby abandoning all principles of analytical reasoning or science that modernity has undoubtedly ushered in. As Bookchin remarks “perhaps we can achieve a way of thinking and experiencing that involves a quasi-animistic respiritization of phenomena-inanimate as well as animate-without abandoning the insights provided by science and analytical reasoning.” As Adorno and Horkheimer revealed, Enlightenment philosophy involved a transformation of the concept of logos as an immanent, discoverable reason embedded in the natural functioning of ecological and natural systems, to “rationalization” a form of analytic logic that treats all objects of its analysis as means to narrowly defined goals. When speaking of the premodern subject’s attachment to conceptions of humility, brotherly love, or justice, Horkheimer writes “They held to such ideas because they saw in them elements of truth, because they connected them with the idea of logos, whether in the form of God or of a transcendental mind, or even of nature as an eternal principle”¹⁷⁵

Öcalan is able to craft a political project centered around a reform of modernity that neither, as many Islamic traditionalist movements have aimed, attempts to impose a reactionary and deeply authoritarian vision onto modern society, nor one which, as the liberal critics of modernity have suggested, seeks to “complete a project of modernity”

¹⁷⁵ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (A&C Black, 2013).

that seems to inevitably lead to an enshrinement of “statecraft” as the means of constructing the body politic and mediating articulations of the individual. This approach brings with it necessarily new problems with comprehending seemingly well understood liberal concepts of international relations and political theory, such as the social contract, the role of institutions in maintaining democratic order, the correct formation of constitutional governments, the meaning of justice. Much of the intellectual traditions devoted to analyzing and exploring these concepts have fallen into conceptual disarray precisely because they suffer from a “silent statism”, a willingness to unquestionably abide by, and failure to question the way in which traditional formulations of liberal political theory may undermine rather than advance the democratic aspirations of non-Western societies. Ocalan’s articulation of an indigenous concept of democracy then stands in stark contrast to, for example, Rawls’s resigned theory of the “overlapping consensus”, which condemns diverse societies to live in a forever unresolvable state of tension. Ocalan chose rather to adopt Bookchin’s notion of “unity in diversity”, which provides a way to structure institutions that frees communities from the need to control or beseech state power to preserve their cultural or religious heritage, or protect their democratic autonomy. Lesli Lipson whose book *Democratic Civilization* initially, if conservatively, proposed an analytical approach which separates democratic institutions from the concept of democratic civilization, lent an important conceptual distinction to Öcalan’s work.

If the events of the Syrian Civil war demonstrate anything, it is that nationalism and statism constitute discursive structures which shape and often limit the potential for

new and more creative forms of political resistance that are not confined to struggle over the institutions of state power. Contemporary authors have noted that a historiographical approach to the post-WWI construction of Arab national identity was rooted in constructing event-driven epistemic break in which the Arabs experienced a “national awakening”, which subsequently drove their demands for independence. This historiography clearly ignores vast social and political complexities, not the least the role of class, ideology, education and other factors in developing competing networks of political actors who advocated for various approaches to resolving the post-Ottoman crisis, and whose ideas contain both continuity and dissidence with past political practice and habitus. In his work *Being Modern in the Middle East*, David Watenpauh writes that as a result of this historiography, “Nationalism and/or national consciousness becomes an essence rather than an ideology with clear historical roots in nineteenth century Western Europe and the Americas. Conceived in such a vein, rebellions against state and imperial authorities and other similar movements in the Ottoman Empire, can be construed as evidence of national consciousness, give an authentic, real and subaltern genealogy to contemporary nationalist movements, rather than one that is “derived,” “imagined,” and elite in the ways described by a diverse cadre of theoreticians of nationalism from Partha Chatterjee to Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson.”¹⁷⁶

The consequence of the inability to question the nationalist framework explain to a certain extent the failure of the larger project to transform Syria though civil war. The

¹⁷⁶ Keith David Watenpauh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton University Press, 2014). page 183

disintegration of the FSA into radical factions responsible for horrific acts of violence, the role of the US and CIA in arming radicals, in supporting Turkish aggression against the Democratic Confederation of Northern Syria, all point to theoretical and structural limitations which political actors either work within or work to overcome. The durability of confederalist institutions in Syria remains unclear, but the widespread popularity and the speed of institution building may have major consequences for how the process of “democratization” in the Middle East will play out of the coming decades.

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